

Executive Summary

Education For Social Change:

The Role Of Education Trade Unions
In Addressing Sustainable
Environmental Development



ETUCE contracted [PPMI](#) to research, with input from a project advisory group, the impact of the climate emergency on education and trade union policies in the European region¹. The research questions investigated the challenges that teachers, academics and other education personnel face due to changes in the environment, and focused on innovative practices of trade unions. The study relied on four sources of information: international policy literature; scientific academic literature; insights from a non-representative online survey with ETUCE member organisations in the autumn of 2021; and analysis of experiences and concerns shared by ETUCE member organisation representatives in two international workshops in Rome (April 2022) and Copenhagen (July 2022). The study identified four major types of challenges that trade union members face either due to the direct threat of climate change or due to working process changes and new demands for education during the climate emergency and reflected on three major areas of trade unions' responses and actions to the challenges.

Challenges for teachers, academics and other education personnel

Increased workload and health problems

Research participants report that the most severe impact that environmental sustainability issues have on working conditions is on [workload](#), followed by mental and physical health. About one in four survey respondents stated that the impact on workload is very negative. The potentially negative impact of teachers, academics and other education personnel taking a bigger role in creating sustainable learning environments on their overall work capacity has been noted in recent research and explained further in the validating workshops. Thus, it is not surprising, that respondents primarily answered that it is challenging to implement education for environmental sustainability (81%). Climate change also poses a direct threat to teachers, academics and other education personnel's [physical and mental health](#) and well-being at work. Schools in some areas are more at risk of climate change hazards than others and face different forms of threats in their climate zones (e.g. mountainous areas at risk of landslides), especially in the countries where a significant share of buildings was built before the first thermal regulations in the 1970s. When asked to consider groups at risk due to the direct and indirect impact of climate change, research participants mentioned older rather than younger teachers, academics and other education personnel, and those in rural rather than urban areas. These groups, as well as special needs staff, are at a disadvantage when facing natural hazards due to their location, working environment and prior conditions. Overall, research participants in Southern Europe reported more acute problems with climate change, whereas research participants in the Northern region of Europe reported fewer such issues and rather highlighted other challenges such as teacher shortages.

¹ In the context of this study, the European region encompasses all the EU countries, candidate countries, EEA countries, Andorra, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Faeroe Islands, Falkland Islands, French Guyana, French Polynesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands Antilles, Russia, Saint Helena, Saint Martin, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, San Marino, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.



Need for more accessible and relevant training opportunities

Research participants emphasised that teachers, academics and other education personnel are not prepared to teach environmental sustainability or deal with the challenges they face due to the impact of climate change on their profession because of a **lack of high-quality and accessible training opportunities**. Lack of training, including of school leaders, is a barrier to coping with environmental sustainability issues and implementing education for environmental sustainability comprehensively and holistically in the content and operations of education institutions. Respondents reported that the most severe challenges were the lack of relevant initial teacher education (ITE), continuous professional development (CPD) being organised outside of working hours, and lack of relevant and good-quality CPD opportunities. These findings should be read in conjunction with the prior noted finding that ETUCE member organisation representatives are most concerned about environmental sustainability issues negatively impacting workload, as **lack of training exacerbates problems with workload**. There is a need for more easily available and good-quality learning opportunities, but for these to provide real learning opportunities they need to be scheduled within working hours to prevent further mental and physical strain on staff. Research participants thus emphasised the need for more accessible and high-quality education opportunities, especially short-term CPD.

Insufficient curricula, assessment frameworks and professional autonomy

Across the European region, **curricula and accompanying assessment frameworks are not yet adapted to effectively deliver EES**. Skills and competences are not defined, and existing assessments do not measure them. Research participants were particularly concerned with the lack of priority of EES within national assessments and curricula frameworks in their countries. Including EES more comprehensively in the curricula and national assessments is crucial as it would signal the need for its prioritisation, funding, learning materials and time allocation further down the line. When there is a lack of suitable curricula and guidance, teachers, academics and other education personnel tend to turn to online learning platforms to search for additional resources and to fill the gap in their knowledge, thus increasing the influence of private and unregulated actors influence on education. Furthermore, to a large extent teachers, academics and other education personnel **do not feel included in the policy decision-making processes** in the countries and are concerned with the lack of discretion within national education frameworks for education personnel to apply the curricula as suited to their local context. It should be noted that there are differences between the ETUCE member states participating in the research and that there has been an increasing push in some countries in recent years to improve curricula and assessment frameworks.

Lack of political vision and serious investment

The lack of prioritisation of the topic among governance actors is a major barrier to mainstreaming EES more widely, and the lack of assessment mechanisms for EES is ultimately proof that the topic is not a political priority in education. Overall, the impression of the trade unions is that **politicians across the European region are not doing enough** to mainstream good practices across countries to transform the education system in a manner that is sufficiently comprehensive to respond to the green transition envisaged in the labour market and the need for every citizen to develop a sustainability mindset from an early age. **Diminishing public resources** make it harder to free up budgets to implement whole-institution initiatives or support institutions in making needed changes. This is in line with recent

research at the EU level from the primary to higher education level²³. Strong and effective leadership is crucial to ensure holistic school approaches, overcome institutional challenges, such as lack of relevant classroom infrastructure and space, and attract qualified staff. However, education leadership cannot act without support and funding. Lastly, research participants highlighted the lack of linking the national education systems to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in particular, SDG 4 on education for sustainable development, in key sectoral documents on the green transition, as this also signals a lack of understanding and prioritisation at the national level of the need to meet the demand for skills for the green transition with EES. It should be noted that the extent of lack of prioritisation from the top down differed from country to country in the study.

Trade union responses to the climate emergency

Strategic level of trade unions: policies and priorities for EES are less common

Overall, there is a **lack of urgent priority and strategic action** within the trade unions on environmental sustainability. With regards to the response from trade unions, the study discovered that while there has been an increased interest among trade unions in alleviating these challenges, there is often a focus on traditional thematic areas (e.g. pay, health etc.) rather than revitalised discourse topics and education reform. Developing comprehensive policies on environmental sustainability and collective bargaining priorities for this purpose are not common. More than half of the survey respondents report that their trade union does not have a comprehensive policy in place at all and does not engage in social dialogue on the topic; the respondents attribute this to environmental sustainability not being considered a priority by the trade union or its leadership. This is partially due to the **limited human and financial resources** within the trade unions themselves. The **difficulty or unwillingness to fit the topic into the traditional trade union agenda** on working conditions, labour rights and pay among members and/or leaders of the trade union is also a reason why trade unions are not taking stronger action. Overall, the challenges highlighted by ETUCE member organisations which further limit trade unions' effectiveness in policymaking on the topic were 1) limited human and financial resources in the trade unions; 2) lack of cross-sectoral communication on environmental sustainability and climate change priorities; 3) controversy regarding the use of the trade union action for addressing climate change; 4) lack of sufficient data regarding the views and needs of their affiliates on addressing environmental issues, and 5) overall weak social dialogue.

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- 2 Mulvik, I., Pribuišis, K., Siarova, H., Vežikauskaitė, J., Sabaliauskas, E., Tasiopoulou, E., Gras-Velazquez, A., Bajorinaitė, M., Billon, N., Fronza, V., Disterheft, A. and Finlayson, A. mission (2021) Education for environmental sustainability: policies and approaches in European Union Member States. Final report. Publications Office of the European Unions. DOI: 10.2766/51869
 - 3 Bunescu, L. and T. Estermann (2021) Greening in European higher education institutions: A governance, funding and efficiency perspective. European University Alliance. Available at: https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/gaf%20greening_final.pdf



Unique tools of social dialogue and collective bargaining not utilised

Social dialogue is an important tool for addressing environmental sustainability in the teacher, academics and other education personnel's professions and institutions they work in. Only half of the participating ETUCE member organisations participate in social dialogue on environmental sustainability, and collective bargaining is the least common among the types of social dialogue. Most of the measures ETUCE member organisations carry out are taken by working alone on the topic and through information-sharing. In order for information-sharing to be considered a part of the social dialogue, it needs to be carried out strategically and targeted at social partners to achieve specific goals. Unfortunately, the impression from the study is that often **information-sharing is carried out in a more passive way that cannot constitute social dialogue**. There is thus much more potential here for ETUCE member organisations to engage in more strategic social dialogue including collective bargaining which is a unique and one of the most powerful tools of trade unions and cross-sectoral broad alliances, and which is one of the good practices highlighted by the study. More importantly, this finding is in line with the general trend of the decrease and deterioration of social dialogue across sectors - a situation which requires action from employers and authorities to revamp the social dialogue.

Need for more trade union actions and peer learning to meet demand

The actions of ETUCE member organisations on the topic of environmental sustainability have only just begun in many countries, and there is a need to further increase the number and frequency of actions in order to have more influence in this area. This does not have to be done quickly and needs to be carried out alongside the development of expertise within the ETUCE member organisations to bring about convincing actions. In open-ended questions, several respondents stated that they are in the **explorative phase of trade union policymaking** on how to deal with the climate emergency in education and that they would have devoted more resources to it if the trade union had more funds, dedicated staff and time available. As many as 22 % of the respondents' trade unions have not dedicated sufficient resources for activities and furthermore they do not monitor the quality of their impact in this regard. There is therefore a huge need for ETUCE member organisations to **learn from each other on what works and to be motivated** to invest more time, staff and overall effort in sustainable practices, projects and social dialogue.