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ETUCE position on

“A new framework for the Implementation of the European Education Area 2021-2030”

Adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 7 June 2021

Background

Following up on the [European Commission’s Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#), the Education Council of the European Union adopted a [Council Resolution](#) on 19 February 2021 that establishes the European Education Area as the new strategic framework for the European cooperation in education and training for the period 2021-2030. This Council Resolution replaces the [ET2020 Strategic Framework](#) and sets up new targets, indicators and benchmarks for national education systems to be achieved by 2030 for “*high quality, innovative and inclusive education and training [...]while fully respecting the principle of subsidiarity*”. The Council Resolution provides an umbrella Strategic Framework for all education sectors and includes the ideas brought forward by recent Commission’s initiatives such as the European Education Area (2017/18/19/20), European Skills Agenda (2020), and Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (2020).

The Council Resolution sets up priorities and targets to be reached by the EU member states within 10 years. These priority areas are:

- Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training.
- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all.
- Enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession, including the well-being of teachers at the attractiveness of the teaching profession.
- Reinforcing European higher education, for which the Council calls for deeper cooperation, including the European Universities initiative, and more synergies with the European Research Area (ERA) and the Bologna Process.
- Supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training.

On each priority areas the Council of the ministers of education defined specific actions and new benchmarks to be achieved by 2030:

- The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%, by 2030.
- The share of low-achieving eight-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%, by 2030.
- Increase participation in early childhood education to at least 96%.
- Reduce the share of early leavers from education and training to less than 9%.
- Reach at least 45% of 25-34 years old people who graduated in tertiary education.
- The share of recent graduates from VET benefiting from exposure to work-based learning during their vocational education and training should be at least 60%, by 2025.

Objective

The following text is a response of ETUCE which represents 127 education trade unions within 51 countries in Europe, to the Council Resolution. This position paper is intended to integrate the previous ETUCE positions on the European Education Area ([March 2018](#); [July 2020](#); [November 2020](#)) by offering a further reflection on how the new framework answers teachers' needs and demands. Besides acknowledging the progress made in recognising the importance of attractiveness of and gender equality within the teaching profession and fair working conditions of teachers, this position demands strengthened social dialogue, better quality jobs and employment conditions, contractual status, career prospects and rewards including decent salaries, a supportive structure for continuous professional development of teachers, and supportive measures to ensure a fair and just digital and green transition. The text points out that on many aspects the Council Resolution constitutes a step backwards compared to previous political agreements.

ETUCE's views

Readiness of education for digital and digital and green transition

ETUCE welcomes that the European Council extended the strategic framework until 2030, instead of 2025 as it was originally proposed by the European Commission. Indeed, we believe that a 5-year timeframe is not sufficient to implement inclusive education reforms and outcomes that are shared, sustainable and future-proof. In order to meet the objectives, full involvement of the education trade unions is essential to the European Education Area Platform.

ETUCE also welcomes that the new 10-year strategic framework envisions education from a holistic perspective, while respecting national competences and the principle of subsidiarity. We remind that in order to achieve the targets of the initiative it is important to ensure the holistic perspective on education, learning and well-being of the students and teachers. We support that the Council Resolution does not focus only on the contingent needs of the labour market but it underlines the importance of guaranteeing social and economic wellbeing and active citizenship for the students. Looking at the challenges for the next decade, in particular in the context of the green and digital transition of industries and the labour market, ETUCE emphasises that the digital and green transition of the education sector should be a crucial priority. However, despite aiming at further enriching "*digital and green dimension of the EU education and training systems*", the Council Resolution misses outlining any concrete actions to enable teachers and trainers to develop digital and green skills and competences. It is essential to guarantee that teachers and trainers have free access to in-service quality and inclusive training programmes on green and digital skills and competences and on adequate pedagogical and didactical use of ICT.

It is imperative that sufficient, sustainable and predictable public investment is boosted to ensure that teachers and trainers have free access to digital tools, IT equipment and adequate technical support. As the Council Resolution talks about teaching, training and learning also in the digital environments in the future, ETUCE stresses that digitalisation must be a supportive tool for delivering high-quality and inclusive education in the respect

of teachers' professional autonomy, and not to become the means of education. As the experience of emergency online teaching and learning has shown during the COVID-19 crisis, it is by no means that fully digital environments can replace the social value and quality of face-to-face teaching. ETUCE underlines that ensuring fair and just digital and green transition in education requires a change towards a more democratised school governance with the involvement of teachers, students and parents, and enhanced and collegial governance in higher education and research. This entails strengthening social dialogue mechanisms and ensuring the full participation of social partners in education in the implementation of the European Education Area.

Social dialogue with education trade unions

The full participation of education trade unions in the development, monitoring and evaluation of education policies and reforms that directly affect teachers is essential. We regret that the whole resolution does not mention the role of social dialogue and education trade unions. ETUCE asks the European Union institutions to ensure and strengthen the participation of education social partners within the governance of the new ten-year framework at EU, national, regional and local levels.

ETUCE welcomes that the Council is willing to pursue the implementation of the new framework within the '*Open Method of Coordination*' working groups. We request ETUCE's active involvement in the future *Open Method of Coordination*' working groups.

Ensuring sustainable public investment

ETUCE welcomes the intensified focus on investment in education and calls upon the Commission and Council to ensure that the policy debates and exchanges respect the commitment to achieve and to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) four on education in its entirety and to fully implement the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) as outlined in its Action Plan presented in March 2021. To this end, ETUCE warns that a limited and ideologically biased debate that narrows the value and scope of education to economic concerns and efficiency as defined by business, market mechanisms and attitudes in education policy, has the potential to undermine the quality of education as a public good and a fundamental human right. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the reliance of markets to provide public goods such as education is neither efficient nor effective. **Equity and social justice should be one of the education's central missions if Europe is to achieve the full potential of the European Education Area that supports coherent and fair society and sustainable growth, rather than assumed improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of spending.**

The proposal for an update of the **Social Scoreboard** as a key monitoring tool used in the European Semester investment and reform coordination framework is most welcome by ETUCE in its attempt to capture equity and fairness in education by measuring variation in students' performance based on their socio-economic status is a step in the right direction. Notwithstanding efforts needed to improve such measure to address all forms of exclusion and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes, in line with SDG indicator 4.5, it is absolutely imperative that this measure is read in conjunction with governments' expenditure in education.

Financing of education must be adequate to produce recovery, rather than to reproduce weaknesses in education systems, the economy and society. In its [Statement on Investment Priorities for Recovery and Resilience](#), ETUCE has reiterated the call to governments to boost education financing to at least 6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to reverse the decade-long trend of decreasing investment. Despite the unprecedented move by the EU to mobilise additional resources through the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the Next Generation EU, including in education, ETUCE recalls that it is the governments' primary responsibility to increase funding and to design public education budgets in a manner that provides sufficient, predictable and sustainable resources even after the lifetime of the Recovery Plans and in a holistic, rather than fragmented and project-based, manner. For an education-led recovery, the European Commission and EU Member States need to urgently lay the basis for a revision of the Stability and Growth Pact rules to allow for a fiscal framework that excludes public education, training, and research investment from the calculation of the deficit and debt levels.

It is of utmost importance to ensure sustainability of investment, accountability and transparency, public scrutiny of education budgets, together with social partnership, to safeguard the public provision and governance of education systems from the influence of private sector investment and actors. ETUCE recalls that effective participation of social partners in the development of the national Recovery and Resilience plans (nRRP) are pre-conditions to ensure that the disruptions caused by the global pandemic do not translate into an even bigger crisis in the education sector, and to achieve reform outcomes that are shared, sustainable and future proof.

Value and recognition of the teaching profession

ETUCE welcomes that the European Council recognises the importance of teachers' motivation to ensure quality education and the need *"to improve working conditions and to address occupational stress, in order to foster the well-being of teachers, trainers and pedagogical and education staff"*. Teachers, indeed, play a vital role in providing quality education and vocational training. Their contribution has proved essential to recovery in education, but the value of the teaching profession remains unrecognised and by no means they should come out of this crisis carrying a greater burden of injustice than they bore during or before. The severe teacher shortage across 24 out of 28 European countries as emerged in the Country Reports 2020 of the European Semester, is threatening the sustainability of education systems. In its previous positions on the European Education Area, ETUCE highlighted that adequate working conditions and salary levels are of utmost importance to attract and retain high-qualified teachers and education staff and to ensure quality education. In this respect, ETUCE regrets that the Council Resolution ignores mentioning the importance of ensuring decent salaries and fair working conditions to teachers and education staff. We remind that the importance of guaranteeing decent teachers' salaries and fair working conditions was also clearly recognised in the [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#) (2020) adopted under the Croatian Presidency of the EU. We consider that the Council Resolution on the European Education Area downgrades the implementation of the previous Council conclusions on

European teachers and trainers and constitutes a major step back from its achievements. We believe, indeed, that Council Conclusions on teachers and trainers (2020) are an important political agreement to support teachers and education staff.

Professional autonomy, academic freedom and institutional autonomy

ETUCE remarks that the Council Resolution only refers to “*freedom for teachers and trainers*” while it completely neglects mentioning the importance of protecting professional autonomy and academic freedom. We remind that promoting the professional autonomy of teachers is essential to guarantee democratic governance and freedom of expression in schools, and to avoid attacks and hate speech against teachers. ETUCE regrets that once again, the new Council Resolution is a step backwards compared to the [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#) (2020) that clearly emphasised the importance of professional autonomy. Concerning higher education and research, the Council Resolution limits mentioning “*fundamental academic values and high ethical principles*” instead of expressing a prominent commitment to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy. ETUCE recalls that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are fundamental values, whose protection is entailed in the [Rome Communiqué](#), adopted by the ministries of the European Higher Education Area at the Ministerial Conference 2020 of the Bologna Process. The [Annex I of the Rome Communiqué](#) defines academic freedom as “*an indispensable aspect of quality learning, teaching and research in higher education as well as of democracy*” and institutional autonomy as its constitutive element. The text also underlines that “*Societies cannot be genuinely democratic without honouring academic freedom and institutional autonomy*”. In light of this important framework, we urge the European Commission and the Council to clearly recognise the fundamental values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the implementation of the new European strategic framework for education and training.

High quality teacher training

ETUCE welcomes that the Council resolution finally commits to move forward and monitor the implementation of first¹, fourth², and eleventh³ principles of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). We hope such a commitment, strengthened by the [Action Plan on Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (2021) will ensure the right to every pupil, student and learner to high quality and inclusive education and training. However,

¹ “Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market”.

² Everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects. This includes the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification. [...] Young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

³ Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.

ETUCE argues that the European Union institutions should also consider applying the first principle of the Social Pillar to guarantee rights to access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning to teachers and trainers, particularly to initial professional education and continuous professional development. At the same time, we believe that the quantitative indicators do not support the strategic priorities and targets sufficiently to improve quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training.

ETUCE reminds about the importance to respect national regulations of minimum qualification requirements to pursue the teaching profession which should be at Masters level for all teachers in each education sector⁴. However, some educational providers, mostly private ones, do not respect such national requirements or strong national regulations are missing in some countries for certain education sectors, such as in VET. This has serious consequences on the quality of education and training. Thus, within the European Education Area this practice should end. The European Commission should encourage the Member States to strengthen and respect national legislations and conditions of accessing the teaching profession in any public and private schools ensured within national accreditation, quality assurance and funding procedures. In the case of the VET sector the implementation of the Osnabruck Declaration (2020)⁵ of the EU ministers should be ensured. This says that *“the attractiveness of teachers’ and trainers’ professions needs to be increased, for instance and if applicable, by supporting access of business professionals to the teachers’ and trainers’ professions within VET institutions, in line with national legislation and conditions of access to the teaching profession.”* ETUCE underlines the importance of equivalent teacher and pedagogical qualifications for all VET teachers.

We welcome that the Council Resolution mentions the need to provide teachers and education staff with *“professional learning opportunities and support throughout their careers”*. The initiative of the Erasmus Teacher Academies can be a starting point, but this will not necessarily lead to an effective solution. Trainings within the Erasmus Teacher Academies Initiative and via other provisions must ensure equal access to all teachers to further learning, recognition of the training at EU, national, and institutional level, and that further learning of teachers are accessible within working hours. The Council Resolution suggests that *“education and training institutions operate as learning organisations”*. In this respect, ETUCE points out that peer learning activities among teachers are not enough to provide high-quality support and continuous professional development. It is essential to build an effective structure to support teachers within the education institutions. Additionally, further guidelines should clarify how school leaders must guarantee that teachers can actually enjoy their rights to access quality and inclusive updated continuous professional development.

Career development of teachers and education staff

⁴ “It is the ETUCE’s firm belief that the objective should be that all teachers are educated to Master’s level” Teacher Education in Europe - An ETUCE Policy Paper, 2008

⁵ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf

Concerning the support to career development of teachers and education staff, the Council proposes to develop *“policy tools in a form of teacher competence frameworks to increase relevance of initial teacher education programmes as well as development of continuous professional development opportunities and to provide guidance for teachers in their career progression”* and *“a European guidance for the development of national career frameworks and lifelong guidance”* to support the career progression for teachers and education staff. Nonetheless, ETUCE asks that any European policy on career framework and professional career guidance in the European Education Area and European Research Area must respect national requirement towards teachers’ and researchers’ qualifications, as well as collective agreements . Besides, effective social dialogue with education trade unions and their full involvement in the development of policy tools and national careers framework must be ensured.

Equality and inclusion in the teaching profession in leadership positions

All teachers should have equal opportunities to improve their career and access to school-leadership positions. ETUCE welcomes that the Council Recommendation urges for concrete actions to ensure gender equality in the teaching profession and leadership positions in all the education sectors. We remind that teaching is a feminised profession, with women teachers making up to 73% of the teachers’ population in the European Union ([Eurostat](#)). Nevertheless, women remain well under-represented in leadership positions in the education institutions. ETUCE also underlines that having a diverse population of teachers is essential to value the diversity reflected within the European society and the student body. Therefore, further measures should be taken to promote the inclusion of teachers with migrant background and minority groups, as well as teachers with special needs.

Teachers’ international mobility

ETUCE welcomes that the Council Resolution commits to *“remove existing obstacles and barriers to all types of learning and teaching mobility, including issues related to access, guidance, student services and recognition”*. The Council also proposes to develop *“a policy framework for increasing the number and quality of learning mobility of teachers in Europe based on their actual mobility needs”*. However, we stress that the implementation of mobility programmes must guarantee decent salaries and fair working conditions, the replacement of the teachers during the mobility period without creating further workload and stress for other teacher colleagues. In addition, the portability of working conditions and salaries, as well as the recognition of the mobility programmes as part of continuous professional development should be assured. We remind that the problem regarding teachers' mobility is the same as for students: teachers coming from low-income countries cannot afford participation in international mobility because of their low salaries. We ask the European Commission for targeted economical support to teachers from low-income countries taking into account the salary level in the home country and the average cost of living in the host country.