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ETUCE position on quality investment in Education and Training

adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 28-29 March 2022

Background:

The topic of quality investment in education, particularly in the context of the Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, is subject to intensive discussion among policymakers in the education sector both at a national and European level.

In 2021, the European Commission tasked an [Expert Group](#) of academics to carry out “an evidence-based evaluation of education and training policies to identify those that allow achieving the twin objective of boosting education outcomes and inclusiveness, and improving the efficiency of spending”. The [Interim Report](#) resulting from the first year of work of the expert group was presented to multiple education stakeholders, including ETUCE, on 19 January 2022. The Final Report of the expert group is planned to be published by September 2022.

On 15 February 2022, The [Interim Report](#) was further discussed in the framework of the inter-ministerial Conference [Investing in Education](#) organised by the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. In this context, the French Ministry put forward a proposal for a **Joint Declaration on quality investment in Education** to be submitted for adoption at the Education Council meeting on 4-5 April 2022.

During the same meeting, the European Commission also announced the creation of a [Learning Laboratory](#) to assess educational investments across Europe after the conclusion of the Expert Group’s work.

Following extensive consultation with ETUCE member organisations and advisory bodies, the below position represents the ETUCE* view on the [Interim Report](#) and provides recommendations to the European Commission and Education Ministers ahead of the Education Council meeting in April 2022.

1. Teachers and trainers:

The notion of ‘effective teachers’: While the Interim Report alludes several times to the idea of “effective teachers”, ETUCE remarks that **this expression is not appropriate and misses accounting for several factors**. These include quality of initial training, working conditions, and well-being which highly contribute to motivated and valued professionals in the education sectors. With a similar approach, the report mentions the possibility to measure ‘**teachers’ effectiveness**’ through students’ test scores and

standardised tests. **ETUCE does not agree with these approaches which deteriorate the quality of education and students' preparedness.**

Attractive Salaries: ETUCE particularly appreciate that the interim report identifies **attractive salaries and social status, better working conditions, and smaller class sizes** as key factors for making the teaching profession more attractive. Nonetheless, ETUCE does not agree with the expert group that, on several occasions, mentions **salaries as a pure cost factor in public budgets**, instead of investment for high-quality education. Besides, by using the pretext of limited available literature, the expert group refrains from providing policy recommendations in support of increasing teachers' salaries. Despite mentioning several benefits linked to competitive salaries for the attractiveness of the teaching profession, the expert group argues that higher salaries do not guarantee better quality teachers.

ETUCE recalls, in fact, that **EU member states signed a political commitment for investing in teachers and trainers, including their salaries, in the [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future \(2020\)](#)**. The same document further mentions that "Evidence suggests that salaries have an impact on recruitment and retention of teachers and trainers, as well as on learning outcomes. Salaries of teachers are often lower than the average salaries of other tertiary-educated workers (ET Monitor 2019, p. 39–40)." **Hence, ETUCE calls on the expert group to integrate this data in its analysis and reformulate its policy recommendation with a view to support investing in teachers' salaries.**

Working conditions: When it comes to teachers' working conditions, the interim report limits the analysis to class sizes. This, according to ETUCE, is a very limited approach. Many other challenges have, in fact, an important impact on the working conditions of teachers. These include the overly centralised curricula, the administrative burden, the missing definition of teachers' working time and the lack distinction between teaching time and preparation/follow-up time in many countries, the inadequate career advancement and Continuous Professional Development (CDP) opportunities, as well as precarious well-being. Besides, the Interim Report points to the shortage and oversupply of teachers as well as to the ageing of teacher population as the main challenges related to "Recruiting effective teachers". ETUCE remarks that these are not the roots but rather consequences of the main issue that is linked to the **inadequate attractiveness of the teaching profession.**

2. Digital education:

Definition of digitalisation: There is no doubt that digital tools and digital skills have become an important component of education and an integral part of teachers' pedagogies. Therefore, ETUCE welcomes the expert group's effort to address the topic of digital education throughout the whole interim report. However, **ETUCE disagrees with the approach of the expert group which defines digitalisation** "as a strategy or process that goes beyond the implementation of technology to imply a deeper, core change to the entire "business model" and the evolution of work. [...] digitalisation is a **transformative change that affects all aspects of modern social life, including education, organisation, communication, and work.**"

Indeed, as recalled in the [Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on opportunities and challenges of digitalisation for the education sector](#), ETUCE firmly supports a need-based approach to digitalisation.

In this sense, digital tools for education must be developed and used in the best way to **respond to the specific needs** of students, teachers, school leaders, academics, other education personnel, while **respecting the professional autonomy and academic freedom of teaching professionals**.

Digitalisation, a supportive tool for in-presence teaching: As acknowledged by the expert group, there are “a range of educational benefits from physical presence and interaction that cannot easily be transferred to a digital platform”. Nevertheless, in other parts of the text, the expert group controversially opens to the possibility of fully online and remote settings, such as remote teaching and replacing in-person tutoring with online tutoring.

Against this backdrop, ETUCE highlights that **policy-makers should refrain from considering digital education a cheap alternative to replacing in-presence educational activities**. Conversely, it is important to use digital tools as supportive tools for in-presence teaching to guarantee high-quality education to all students and preserve the invaluable social aspects of learning, particularly in primary and secondary education.

Using digital tools to foster interaction among teachers, parents, and students: Regarding the potential - mentioned by the expert group - of “digital technologies to help connect families, students and schools and to develop compensatory programmes”, ETUCE warns on the **risks for the right to disconnect for education workers and screen addiction**, increasingly affects learners. Besides, the actual development of these programmes would require the **hiring of additional education staff and must not increase the workload and administrative burden** of teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

Teachers’ initial education and CDP on digital education: ETUCE has repeatedly underlined the need for quality teacher initial education programmes to entail up-to-date pedagogies - integrating the use of digital tools – and better opportunities for accessible and quality continuous professional development. In this respect, ETUCE shares the view of the expert group in stating that **online training fails to provide teachers with sufficient opportunities to engage with specific pedagogical content**. Controversially, though, a few paragraphs later, the interim report embraces online teacher training as “a more cost-effective way of raising the pedagogical digital competences of in-service teachers”. ETUCE [reiterates](#) its serious concern on the attempts to replace in-presence CDP, a concrete workers’ right, with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that undermines the quality of pedagogies and adequacy of interaction.

Keys for (un)success of digitalisation in education: It is regrettable that the expert group identifies the **lack of pedagogical digital skills of teachers and the negative teachers’ attitude toward digitalisation** as the main issues for digital education ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and even, inequalities. ETUCE strongly opposes this approach which is **inadequate in representing the multifaceted challenges** related to the use of digital technologies in education and **inappropriately pushes the burden of (un)success of digital education on the teaching profession**. Generally, the Interim Report fails to elaborate on fundamental issues related to digital education such as health and safety challenges for teachers and students, biases of digital tools and AI systems, data protection, lack of technical support and assistance, unequal access to digital tools, screen addiction and the right to disconnect.

3. Management, infrastructure and learning environments:

Social Dialogue and Democratic Leadership: ETUCE regrets that the expert group does not support **collegial governance and democratic leadership** and considers them as difficult to operationalise. Each decision-making having an impact on teachers and learners must be the result of meaningful social dialogue with education workers in the education sector. However, it is disappointing that the expert group never mentions the crucial role of **meaningful consultation with education social partners and collective bargaining**, including at a local level, to ensure quality education and improve social standards. Therefore, ETUCE demands the expert group to reformulate its recommendation by putting more emphasis on the importance of **social dialogue, democratic leadership and collegial governance** in the design, implementation, and governance of education policies. These are, indeed, the cornerstone to ensuring democratic teaching and learning environments, as well as to ensure active participation, and creative involvement in the education of teachers and students.

The importance of sustainable public investment: When it comes to management, the Interim Report also focuses **on the budget allocated to improve educational infrastructure**. In this respect, ETUCE underlines the important role of **sustainable public investment** in ensuring quality educational infrastructure. Indeed, [ETUCE data](#) shows that **public investment in real terms has actually decreased** in recent years. Besides, education is alarmingly subject to the increasing influence of **private investment, for-profit companies, and public-private partnerships** which, as extensively [studied](#) by ETUCE, have proved inadequate for ensuring quality education infrastructure and pedagogies. Furthermore, in the context of the **Recovery** from the health, economic and social crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ETUCE warns that [cross-national research](#) shows budget cuts are expected to be implemented, following the settlement phase of the crisis. Overall, ETUCE remarks that the report pushes the cost-effectiveness approach to the extreme and seems seeking the cheapest solutions, rather than those which are the most adequate for ensuring quality education to all learners.

Recovery, an opportunity to remove barriers: The interim report gives much attention to **effective** and efficient investment in education as keys in the Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it defines effectiveness as “the ability to provide high-quality educational outcomes, by making the most of the available human and physical resources; while efficiency is understood as “the ability to provide the desired educational outcomes at the lowest possible cost”. In this respect, ETUCE points out that quantitative-based and cost-effectiveness approaches aimed to maximise the outcomes at the minimum cost **fail to address the core value of education as a human right and a public good**.

Furthermore, as outlined in the ETUCE [Priorities for Recovery and Resilience](#), ETUCE calls on removing barriers to access education posed by the rationalisation of school infrastructure, both in the urban and rural areas, by investing in sustainable, low-carbon emissions, and safe school buildings as well as in safe and quality digital infrastructure. **ETUCE supports public sustainable investments focused on digital and green pedagogies and learning environments**. A ‘greening school design’ must consider

pedagogical aspects and decent practical working conditions, starting from good ventilation, a necessity as the pandemic continues.

Education institutions as ‘centres of communities’: ETUCE remarks that the widespread **uniformity of school buildings**, which privileges standardised learning environments as ‘effective’ and ‘cheap’ solutions, is not adequate to the teaching and learning needs such as acoustic suitability, learners’ movement, and adequate interaction spaces. ETUCE calls on policy-makers to ensure that education institutions become quality **‘centres of communities’** that encourage pedagogical flourishing of learners and active engagement of the entire community. Therefore, the design of school infrastructure must be implemented through grassroot **collective planning**, bringing together policy makers, local authorities, workers, students, and parents, in accordance with the **whole school approach**.

4. Equity and inclusion:

Fairness vs equality: ETUCE welcomes that the report focuses on the equality and inclusion aspect of education. Nevertheless, according to the expert group **fairness in education** means “that all children can have the same learning opportunities to realise their potential”. ETUCE does not support this approach and argues that fair and inclusive education should provide **learning opportunities tailored to the students’ needs and value each individual’s cultural, social, economic, learning and professional background**. ETUCE also reminds that **inclusive education is an adequate response to increasingly complex societies which considers diversity as an added value**.

Value diversity in education: A disadvantaged framework and school segregation reduce the opportunities for students with an already disadvantaged socio-economic background. Instead, ETUCE demands the expert group to stress that **democratic values, respect for human dignity, and an open-minded approach to other cultures should be implemented with direct contact of learners coming from different cultures and social groups**.

Keys to counter inequalities in education: ETUCE welcomes that the report acknowledges that “the measures to improve the socio-economic composition of schools and incentives to attract teachers to disadvantaged schools are less common”. ETUCE further underlines that general teachers’ shortage, the ‘difficult-to-staff’ schools in some disadvantaged regions are also important issues to be addressed. Nevertheless, ETUCE regrets that the report proposes closing schools or classrooms to achieve a higher diversity as **closing institutes with vulnerable learners’ put them in ever more disadvantaged situations**. Instead, ETUCE recommends opening more schools in areas with high levels of concentration of vulnerable students, making them more diverse, allowing for more targeted support due to less crowded schools. This requires sustainable public investments rather than “more attractiveness” and “new private providers” suggested by the report.

Equality and inclusion are matters of social dialogue: On the “wide variation across programmes in the magnitude of the additional investment and how such funding is allocated”, ETUCE remarks that education personnel and their representatives are rarely or never consulted on how and where the

additional funds should be allocated. ETUCE stresses the importance of advising the EU Member States to include education social partners and education trade unions respectively, as spokespersons for educators in their daily work, to better monitor the allocation of additional funds. While the report supports “replacing school-based policies with individual based ones”, **ETUCE demands investing in various dimensions of inclusive education in all schools, making them inclusive for people with special needs, investing in the first-language acquisition.** Social Dialogue, coupled with de-segregation policies, plays a vital role in emphasizing the role of the teachers’ autonomy to find the best ways of teaching and co-teaching according to the specific learners’ needs.

Conclusions and recommendations:

ETUCE welcomes that the expert group has developed from the perspective that “**education and training are the foundation for personal development and well-being**”. However, the **market-oriented and capitalistic approach to investment in education** adopted in the whole report is regrettable. This encourages - *de facto* - the commodification of education and its detriment as a human right. Besides, in mostly all the chapters, the report misses a comprehensive consideration of *the European Pillar of Social Rights* and its implementation.

Furthermore, the entire analysis of the expert group is substantially based on US and UK data, while lacking references to EU data. Despite the lack of evidence on several topics addressed in the report, the expert group generally seeks a one-size-fits-all approach, aimed at reducing costs and favouring budget cuts rather than encouraging quality education. ETUCE emphasises that **reducing educational outcomes to a mathematical analysis dramatically hinders the quality of education and its pedagogical value.** Besides, economic research has also shown that GDP, used as a main reference in the report, is not an adequate metric to measure social progress where education plays a crucial role. Instead, ETUCE calls on the expert group to adopt a holistic approach that carefully considers the features of each educational context, its qualitative aspects, and the richness it entails.

In particular, ETUCE regrets that both the report and the mandate of the Expert Group do not mention the involvement of Education Social Partners and Social Dialogue, being compiled as a top-down instrument for the EU Member States.

Overall, the report shows an effort in collecting literature on investment in education. Nevertheless, by focusing on literature review without new research on the issue, the expert group does not provide strong evidence-based policy recommendations to the EU Member States.

ETUCE believes that the outcomes of the interim report should call on the European Commission and the Member States to reflect upon three lessons:

- Any policy recommendation addressed to the education sector must go beyond a cost-based approach, quantitative statistical inference, and neoclassical metrics, such as the GDP. These metrics are not adequate to address the complexity of the pedagogical and social aspects of education, which is primarily a human right.

- As education is a public good and the right of every individual, policy recommendations in education must not encourage the research of the cheapest solutions, but they should rather aim to ensure the best quality of education, leaving no one behind.
- Concrete involvement of education workers in the decision-making, meaningful dialogue and consultation with social partners are essential for the formulation of policy recommendations that produce a concrete added value for teachers and learners in the education sector.

**The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 127 Education Trade Unions and 11 million teachers in 51 countries of Europe. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of education trade unions.*