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ETUCE comments on the European Commission 2019 Country Reports in the education and training field

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On 27 February 2019, the European Commission published the annual [Country Reports of each Member State](#) which form the basis for the dialogue with Member States on their national policy choices ahead of the presentation of their **National Reform Programmes** in April 2019 and will lead to the formulation of the **Country Specific Recommendations** in May 2019. The Country Reports monitor reforms and point to issues that EU Member States should address. All the Country Reports include a chapter on Education and training systems, including the assessment of the implementation of previous years' Country Specific Recommendations and of the policy challenges and priorities still to be addressed.

A European Commission's [Communication on the main findings from the Country Reports](#) sets the scene for the Country Reports. It depicts a favourable economic scenario, with public finances being improved across the board, robust growth and expansion forecast in every Member State, employment rates at record level and unemployment rates at low records. On the other side, the Communication warns about global uncertainty and calls for Member States to continue **boosting productivity**, improving the **resilience of the economies** and ensuring that **economic growth benefits all citizens**. This optimistic view is challenged, however, by social distress across European countries, a wage-poor recovery, significant slack in the labour market, public investment being smashed following ten years of fiscal adjustment and cost-competitiveness measures (slightly recovering only as from last year), and the high level of inequalities across and within many Member States.

For the second year, the **European Pillar of Social Rights' (EPSR) principles and rights** have been considered in the Country Reports as a compass to monitor, to assess and to compare the progress made in delivering new and more effective rights to citizens, ensuring equal opportunities and inclusion policies. Some specific themes are highlighted in the different Country Reports for a more effective steering of 'social' policies in the upcoming National Reform Programmes. The extent to which they will be considered is yet to be seen, not the least because none of the rights and principles of the Pillar at national level will be implemented for free and without adequate public investment. Budgetary resources are in fact still under the strict budgetary constraints of internal market and fiscal rules set by the Stability and Growth Pact and it remains challenging for governments to find the necessary public resources to make the social re-balancing hailed by the EPSR concrete. **The tension between the current standing of the binding budgetary norms and a set of rights and principles without enforcement resources remains unsolved.**

In the frame of the proposal for a the new EU budget, the aim is to have a **better alignment of the new EU funds to the economic and social priorities** identified at national level through the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations, providing fresh resources for the implementation of the Pillar. As a novelty, this year, the European Commission highlights **public investment needs** in the different Member States, and

identifies the possible use of the EU Cohesion policy funds in the forthcoming programming period 2021-2027. Lastly, the role of the **Structural Reform Support Programme** to improve the implementation of reforms highlighted in the Country Reports is also described, in the form of 'technical support' provided to governments.

The following note gives a **thematic overview of the education-related priorities** identified across all the Country Reports on the basis of the EPSR Social Scoreboard indicators related to:

- Education, skills and lifelong learning, including early leavers from education and training, adult participation in learning, underachievement in education and tertiary educational attainment;
- Inequality and upward mobility, including the variation in performance explained by students' socio-economic status;
- Impact of public policies on reducing poverty, including general government expenditure in education;
- Early childhood and care, including the provision of formal childcare to children who are less than 3 years old;
- Digital skills.

In line with the first principle of the EPSR stating that *'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions into the labour market'*, ETUCE welcomes the emphasis of the Country Reports on ensuring inclusive and high quality education for all, especially for the most disadvantaged. As ETUCE pointed out in its document ['education priorities for the AGS 2019'](#), and in light of the Pillar implementation, the need to boost **education investment, professional and working conditions of education personnel, and equity and equality in education** are key for Europe to resume economic growth and to progress towards social justice. We welcome that all the Country Reports assess the quality of education systems also taking these three aspects into consideration. The extent to which and the way they are covered across all the Country Reports is reported hereunder.

Make high quality investment a priority to resume economic growth and progress towards social justice

- The call to **increase investment in education and training**¹ to offset a decade of budget cuts and underfunding of education systems, with their well-documented detrimental effects on quality education, on education personnel and infrastructures² is certainly welcome. Investment needs are especially assessed in early childhood education and care,³ skills,⁴ higher education,⁵ and research and innovation.⁶ However, such a call sits alongside demands for **enhanced cost-efficiency and/or effectiveness** of public spending and consolidation of resources.⁷
- This year, for the first time, **investment needs are identified with the declared aim of improving productivity and long-term inclusive growth**. Based on this,

¹ As for BG, HR, CZ, EE, FI, DE, GR, IE, IT, LV, LU, PL, RO, SK, ES, and UK.

² As for BG, EE, GR, IT, PT, RO, and SE.

³ As for AT, HR, CY, DE, GR, IE, LT, MT, RO.

⁴ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, GR, HU, IT, LV, LU, MT, NL, PL, RO, SK, SI, ES, SE, and UK.

⁵ As for FI, IE, IT, and PL.

⁶ As for HR, EE, FI, DE, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, SK, SI, and ES.

⁷ As for AT, BE, BG, CY, EE, and LV.

investment on **skills for the labour market**⁸ is identified as a priority to tackle skills shortages and to better match companies' needs. In ETUCE's view, the risk is that the dominance of economic issues and the focus on the *marketable* aspects of education might overshadow broad education policy objectives, which are vital for a long-term sustainable development of Europe, where prosperity is fully shared by all. Not only adapting to rapid technological changes will require more than narrow sets of market-oriented and contingent company-required skills, if Europe is serious in its will to address mounting social distress and socio-economic disparities, it will have to resolve the real crisis in education – that is focused on issues of equity. **Instead of binding education to the rules of the market, the Country Reports' comprehensive assessment of remaining barriers to educational quality, access and inclusion should translate into bolder investment priorities.**

- This year, the European Commission has introduced a **new link between the Country Reports and the EU Cohesion Policy budget**, proposing targeted areas for the use of EU funds in the period 2021-2027, as a starting point for the future dialogue between the Commission and the Member States. In its attempt to provide EU resources for the implementation of the EPSR on one side, and for innovative and smart industrial transformation on the other, **EU funds are geared, *inter alia*, towards the priorities identified in the Country Reports.** While this translates into the **promotion quality inclusive education and training and lifelong learning**⁹ by means of enhancing access to and provision of early childhood education and childcare,¹⁰ life-long learning and VET,¹¹ tertiary education,¹² teachers' competences,¹³ skills for innovation, smart specialisation and entrepreneurship,¹⁴ including key competences and digital skills;¹⁵ and to cover investment in education infrastructure,¹⁶ it also promotes enhanced **commercialisation of research outcomes**,¹⁷ going hand in hand with strengthened **science-business links**¹⁸ and increased collaborations between research, universities and enterprises.¹⁹
- ETUCE argues that the EU budget can become a valuable source of additional funding to implement the principles and rights of the EPSR. However, this should only be supplementary and should not be seen as an excuse for governments to give up to their primary obligation to properly and adequately fund high quality education for every child/student. Enlarging the revenue base through adequate, fair and progressive tax systems that redistribute wealth should remain the primary option to provide quality public services, including education. Additionally, a strong education and training window in EU funding and EU investment instruments should be warned against the risk of **EU funding-promoted public-private partnerships and blending finances**. Education systems shall by no means fall prey to business interests, as competitive and profitable new segment for private providers. In this respect, ETUCE recalls that private market opportunities are not

⁸ As for CY, EE, FI, FR, DE, IT, NL, PL, SK, ES, and SE.

⁹ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FR, DE, GR, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES, and SE.

¹⁰ As for AT, CY, GR, HU, IE, LV, LT, PL, RO, and SK.

¹¹ As for AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, GR, HU, IT, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, PT, RO, SI, and ES.

¹² As for IT and PL.

¹³ As for BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FR, DE, GR, LV, LT, MT, PL, RO, SK, ES, and SE.

¹⁴ As for HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, DE, GR, HU, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, PT, SK, SI, ES, and SE.

¹⁵ As for CY, CZ, DK, GR, HU, LU, PL, PT, SI, ES, and SE.

¹⁶ As for GR, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT, RO, and SI.

¹⁷ As for HR, EE, LT, PL, and SE.

¹⁸ As for AT, HU, and PL.

¹⁹ As for BE, BG, HR, CZ, EE, FR, DE, LV, LT, PL, PT, SK, and SE.

necessarily compatible with quality public education and with the need to uphold public oversight and accountability for schools and education institutions.

Boost professional and working conditions of education personnel to overcome current and future teacher shortages

- **Quality teaching is at the core of the education and training chapters in this year's analysis.** In the context of **current or foreseen teacher shortages**²⁰ in some subjects or geographical areas, **low attractiveness of the profession**²¹ for young people and/or **high drop-out rates** as it is in Belgium and the UK, have the potential to impact on the delivery of quality education. In the Swedish assessment, Lärarförbundet's reported data clarifies that over 10.000 compulsory school teachers, one in ten, are due to retire in the next five years, leading to an estimated teacher shortage in 2031 of over 80.000, based on current patterns. Throughout all the Reports, it is largely recognised that measures are needed to **raise the attractiveness of the profession.**²² Anticipated ageing and demographic challenges, urban and rural divide, unattractive working conditions and career pathways, insufficient education programmes are accounted as the main factors influencing the low attractiveness of the profession.
- **Low teacher salaries,**²³ **deteriorating working conditions,** workload and work organisation,²⁴ **limited career prospects**²⁵ and the high number of **temporary contracts** especially in Spain, where they account for 24.7% of the teaching workforce and in Greece – threaten the sustainability of education systems at different levels. Plans to address the context in which teachers work, starting from their **recruitment and appointment, to the evaluation and accountability**²⁶ are also highlighted. In line with ETUCE member organisations' input, the lack of adequate support for teachers' **initial training and continuous professional developed opportunities**²⁷ are considered equally detrimental to the provision of quality education, especially regarding meeting the educational needs of children from vulnerable groups.
- Several Country Reports recognise that staff reductions and the deterioration of **teaching and research conditions in higher education** are compromising its overall quality. This is particularly relevant where cuts in higher education investment and restructuring are recognised to be the main cause of **understaffed** systems, **precarity** and **low remuneration** of academic staff.²⁸ In Finland, staff reductions and deterioration of teaching and research conditions have caused some of the best professors and key researchers to leave the country. In the UK, potential changes to the immigration policy could have a negative impact on research and teaching prospects, as international staff made up to 20% of all university staff and 30% of all academic staff in 2017, according to the Report.

Make quality education a reality for all

²⁰ As for BE, BG, HR, CZ, EE, DE, HU, LV, NL, PT, SK, SE, and UK.

²¹ As for BE, BG, HR, CZ, EE, HU, IT, LV, PL, PT, SK, SI, and UK.

²² As for BE, BG, HR, CZ, EE, DE, IT, LV, PL, SK, and SI.

²³ As for BG, CZ, EE, HU, IT, LT, NL, PL, and SK.

²⁴ As for BE, IT, and NL.

²⁵ As for CZ, EE, IT, SK, and ES.

²⁶ As for CY, CZ, GR, IT, PL, PT, ES, and UK.

²⁷ As for BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FR, GR, IT, LT, LU, MT, PL, RO, SK, ES, SE, and UK.

²⁸ As for ES, FI, HR, IT, PL, and SI.

- The focus on **equity and equal opportunities** in educational access and outcomes due to socio-economic or migrant background, as well as for people with disabilities, indicates a more holistic view on education and training compared to the previous years. The equality-based narrative is considered generally in line with the input provided by ETUCE member organisations.²⁹ **Improving quality and inclusiveness of education** is recognised to be a matter of concern for no less than half of the European countries.³⁰ This can be due to several factors: residential segmentation, segregated school systems, migration background, parents' educational attainment and income level, rural-urban divide, and it is particularly relevant for Roma children in some Central and Eastern European countries. To offset disadvantages suffered at an early age, measures to enhance **participation in early childhood education and care**³¹ are needed, so as to break the cycle of disadvantages, including by lifting the costs and fees to access early childhood as they limit the participation for low-wage earners. This is for example the case in Bulgaria and Czech Republic, for migrants and for the most disadvantaged groups. Yet, the educational level of parents, territorial disparities, disabilities and migrant background also affects representation, attainment level and access to **higher education**.³²
- **Equity gaps in educational outcomes**³³ are recorded in more than half of the 28 EU countries. Similarly, **early school-leaving rates** remain high among children with migrant background³⁴ and for people with disabilities.³⁵ For ETUCE, this analysis should bring to surface learning and inclusion difficulties in the classrooms that risk aggravating inequality and discrimination in society, at time of major social distress across many European countries. **Investment to address educational inequalities**³⁶ as well as measures to **attract qualified teachers** to disadvantaged schools, their need for training on specific **competences**³⁷ and the **quality of resources**³⁸ available, are identified as key to redress this issue.
- Across all the Country Reports, **skills shortages and mismatches**³⁹ are considered amongst the main **obstacles to business investment** and to reduce structural unemployment. **Better aligning education systems to labour market needs** is presented as the main policy option to untap labour potential, to keep up with labour market trends and technological changes. In particular, reforms are envisaged with a strong focus on promoting **STEM related subjects**,⁴⁰ skills for **innovation, smart specialisation, entrepreneurship**⁴¹ and **digital skills**.⁴² Despite the integration of ICT into education and teaching, as well as teachers' digital skills⁴³

²⁹ As reported so far by ETUCE member organisations in Belgium (COV, CSC-E), Czech Republic (CMKOS), Denmark (DLF), Finland (OAJ), Germany (GEW and VBE), Latvia (LIZDA), Luxembourg (SNE) and Slovenia (ESTUS).

³⁰ As for BG, CZ, GR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, RO, SK, and UK.

³¹ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CZ, FI, RO, and SK.

³² As for AT, BE, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, LT, LV, PL, PT, SI, and UK.

³³ As for AT, BE, BG, CZ, DK, FR, DE, GR, HU, IT, LT, LU, MT, RO, SK, and SE.

³⁴ As for BE, DK, FI, DE, IT, ES, and SE.

³⁵ As for HR, DE, IE, IT, LT, and UK.

³⁶ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CZ, DE, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, and PT.

³⁷ As for BE, BG, CZ, EE, FR, DE, and RO.

³⁸ As for BE, CZ, FR, and RO.

³⁹ As for AT, BE, BG, RO, NL, EE, IT, LT, FI, EL, ES, IE, SI, SE, and UK.

⁴⁰ As for BE, BG, RO, and NL.

⁴¹ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, DE, GRE, HU, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, PT, SK, SI, ES, and SE.

⁴² As for BG, CY, CZ, LV, PT, and SK.

⁴³ As for CZ, EE, DE, MT, SK, and ES.

being identified as a priority, investment to better support the use of **ICT in education** are considered a priority only in few countries.⁴⁴ Improving the labour market relevance of **Vocational Education and Training**⁴⁵ (VET) is the biggest challenge to this day, including efforts to raise its attractiveness,⁴⁶ quality of teaching⁴⁷ and inclusiveness.⁴⁸

- Enhancing the **labour market relevance of higher education and training**⁴⁹ systems is also deemed crucial to meet companies' needs. This year, the continuous and decade-long focus on increasing the cooperation between higher education institutions and businesses, is emphasised by the call to **strengthen science and business links**⁵⁰ to boost innovation results, and complemented by the demand to **boost the number of ICT and STEM offers and graduates**⁵¹ with a view to increase their employability and untap Europe's smart growth potential. In Spain, for example, the agreement between the Spanish universities' association and the conference of business organisations to **increase business participation in the universities' decisions** on curricula and teaching methods, is regarded as a promising initiative. At times when social dialogue and the culture of collegial governance in higher education and research are questioned and under pressure, discarding the public responsibility to boost **business-oriented research** and the focus on **commercialisation of university outcomes** remains a source of concern for ETUCE. It endangers the quality of higher education and research, poses a threat to its democratic governance, to the autonomy of universities and research institutions and to the academic freedom for research and academics.

⁴⁴ As for AT, CY, DE, IT, and SK.

⁴⁵ As for HR, CY, DK, EE, FR, EL, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, RO, SK, SI, and ES.

⁴⁶ As for FR, DE, DK, EL, IT, LV, and RO.

⁴⁷ As for SK.

⁴⁸ As for BG, FR, DE, and HU.

⁴⁹ As for BG, HR, SS, RO and SK.

⁵⁰ As for AT, BG, EE, FI, FR, HU, LT, MT, PT, PL, RO, SI, ES, and UK.

⁵¹ As for AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, DK, LV, MT, PT, ES, RO, SK, and SE.