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# ETUCE

## European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

### EUROPEAN REGION- ETUCE

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus is causing an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis and has a major impact on the education sector, education personnel and students alike. The short, medium, and long-term impact of the current public health crisis on people's lives, on society and on the economy is paramount and requests a serious paradigm shift. Across Europe schools, universities and other education institutions are moving their coursework and teaching online and/or to other means of teaching remotely.

As the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) evolves around the globe, schools and other education institutions are moving back into the central focus of authorities and society. In many countries measures of quarantine, isolation and self-distancing between individuals, families and within communities have been put in place as the only collective response to the virus and education personnel and their unions are proving their willingness to mobilise and work together for the common good. While large parts of the education systems across Europe are closing schools, universities and other education institutions, education personnel remain the pillars of their communities. Across Europe, parents and families are inevitably reminded that education is a key sector in our society, especially as regards the social aspects of teaching and learning. **The provision of education is central to maintaining a sense of normality for students, parents and communities.** This is why it is **vital that education personnel are appropriately supported** to be able to continue their work in the best possible conditions, and to play their key role **in enduring this crisis, and shaping the reconstruction of more equitable, fair and sustainable societies.** ETUCE stands in solidarity with its member organisations, the education community, public services and education personnel across Europe, and **urges governments, education authorities, employers in education and decision-makers in education to address the following issues:**

**Education personnel is key in tackling this crisis. Social dialogue and the protection of their rights is, more than ever, imperative.**

1. While the responsibility of the protection of education personnel lies with governments and education employers, in all matters pertaining to the performing of duties of education personnel, **social dialogue and collective bargaining must remain central in the adaptation of the education sector to these circumstances.** In times when pressure is particularly high, the rights of all education personnel, regardless of their employment status, including those on precarious employment contracts, must be upheld, such as the right to continued employment and pay, the right to paid sick leave as well as to privacy and to disconnect. Also, trade unions must be meaningfully consulted and involved at all times by authorities and employers. In particular, arrangements need to be made to allow for the lost periods of schooling, studies or research to be accounted for and to find solutions to allow students as well as education and research personnel under fixed-term and/or short-term work/study contracts to extend their arrangements by the same length of the period lost. **In no way should any education personnel at all levels of education, from early childhood to primary, secondary, higher education and**



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**research, vocational education and training and adult learning be suffering both economic and professional detriment for the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 emergency.**

2. In particular, education staff **under fixed-term short-term contracts** must not be **subject to further precariousness** due to the ongoing crisis. In cases of education institutions closed, and if these individuals are unable to work from home, their **contracts should not be terminated early, nor should they lose part of, or the entirety of their salaries.**
3. The education sector, in times of generalised, and often mandatory, social isolation, mobilises to continue providing a vital public service. The **physical and mental well-being and health** of its workers cannot be understated. At a time when many education institutions are requested to close, and teachers and other education personnel are invited to work from their homes, the impact of these exceptional social distancing measures - when applied to a sector inherently thriving on social interactions, on the health and well-being of education personnel, must be addressed **so they can carry on their key role in their communities.**
4. The working conditions of education personnel working from home require particular attention. Indeed, working remotely requires a substantial reorganisation of the lesson plan and course work and entails **particular efforts from the teacher** to ensure that students are able to follow and receive quality education remotely. **Questions regarding the workload, working-life balance, and psychosocial well-being must be paramount to the organisation of working from home in these extraordinary circumstances.** Particular attention must be brought to education personnel's **right to disconnect outside of their normal working hours, as a crucial means to maintain work-life balance.**
5. In the cases of education personnel being requested to come to education premises, **the health and safety measures put in place at the workplace must be designed in light of health and safety authorities' and expert's recommendations, in consultation with workers' representatives,** and clearly communicated, while the implementation of these measures must be facilitated by the leadership of education institutions.

**Education workers are adapting to continue providing quality education remotely to millions of students. Their service is vital for the common good and they must receive the support they need to perform their jobs.**

6. With most countries in Europe facing closures of education institutions at national, regional or local level, and teachers and other education personnel being invited to work from home, many questions **arise as to the impact of continued remote education provision on the quality of education** provided in such circumstances. While the measures on distance teaching can differ from school to school, we believe that, in these exceptional circumstances, **the organisation of classes and choice of resources remains the autonomous decision of the teacher, and it is crucial that teachers receive the appropriate training to organise the adequate remote teaching activities in a structured way, not in the least to avoid a cacophony of different online platforms.**

7. In addition, this crisis has highlighted the limits and risks of continued remote teaching and learning, and has reiterated the crucial need for, and **the inherent benefits of student-teacher interaction for students' educational outcomes**. Among the limits and risks that prolonged remote teaching entail, ETUCE warns of **the risks entailed in using online tools and devices, such as the collection and possible misuse of education personnel's and students' data by private companies, for example in the education technology sector or public authorities**.
8. This crisis shows that education institutions have simply not been prepared for remote teaching. Pressing issues regarding the **digital divide and unequal access to distance teaching and learning material must be addressed**, in view to ensure that all education personnel and students are able to work together, and that **no one is left behind due to not having access to appropriate devices or to the necessary online equipment**.

**Our societies are facing the crisis of a generation. Now, more than ever, solidarity, human rights, dignity, respect, inclusion and democracy must be upheld as our funding principles.**

9. When addressing the impact of the virus on society and economy, governments and authorities have to ensure that all, including the most affected and disadvantaged groups, are protected and adequately supported. ETUCE calls on education authorities and governments to ensure the inclusion of all students and education staff to prevent the magnifying effect of the pandemic crisis on **existing inequalities deepening the gaps between different socio-economic backgrounds, cities and rural areas, people of migrant and non-migrant background, women and men, different age groups**, etc. In particular, **precarious and marginalised populations are the most at risk of exposure**, as well as an inability to access care services. While examples of individual displays of solidarity have been nothing short of outstanding, the **protection of at-risk populations requires the full attention of governments to coordinate and generate a collective response**.
10. The impact of the coronavirus and government measures to prevent it from spreading is **especially hard on women and gender equality**. Women who already to a higher percentage tend to work in more precarious and temporary employment conditions are more affected by short-term work and temporary unemployment schemes. The closure of school and childcare services means women will be to an even greater extent taking care of looking after children and the elderly as well as the household. These and other consequences of the economic crisis following the pandemic risk exacerbating further the gender pay and pension gaps, horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labour market, and the increase of gender-based violence and harassment.

**European societies were not prepared to face this crisis due to a decade of predominant austerity, market and profit-oriented policies. Now is the time to make good use of the lessons learnt from the past, once and for all, and to demand a structural reorientation: structural changes for an economy that works for people.**

11. Whilst the coronavirus is first and foremost a public-health emergency, it is also an economic and social one. In the face of unprecedented levels of drops in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that are being forecast, both in the euro-area and globally,

governments across the EU are **massively intervening in the economy** to ensure that this shock does not translate into the greatest economic contraction of modern times and spirals into a deep and long-lasting depression. In a historical move, the EU has suspended the Growth and Stability Pact and the state-aid rules, to ensure that national governments can spend to keep their people safe and to protect the well-being of the communities first. In other words, **in the emergency, all governments have paved the way for public investment based on rights and needs, rather than profits or on the neoliberal dogma for budgetary balance and austerity.**

12. **The pandemic is making visible the damage that the neoliberal model has produced over the past decade with the downsizing of the public space, based on the dogmatic belief that the market is a more efficient and effective decision maker,** and that it is able to provide what is needed. For many years, ETUCE has been warning of the disastrous effects of budgetary cuts on education as an effect of imposed austerity. In parallel, ETUCE has been calling on governments and education authorities that education - a fundamental right and a public good - has to be exempt from free and unrestrained market mechanisms and approaches. A decade of economic crisis, austerity measures and systemic underinvestment in education, the increasing exposure of education to privatisation and marketisation pressures, have caused incalculable problems. They have eroded traditional forms of social solidarity and financial redistribution and emphasised the role of the individual and of personal ambitions above social aspirations and collective actions, leading to exclusion, segregation and increasing inequality. Teachers and their unions across Europe are ready to fight back against any current or future attempt to use the greatest threat of modern times to humans' health, society and the global political economy, as an excuse to harm further the value and mission of education; and to justify further cuts in education through a new wave of imposed austerity.
13. **Today's economic, social and health emergency has the potential to force the market and its ideology to step back, and to revive the importance of our public spaces and services, including schools, universities and other education institutions. Now is the time to value and appreciate all the employees working in the education sector, and to protect the democratic community and governance of our institutions.** The models we choose today will determine the world we will live in tomorrow. For ETUCE, these must be based on access to universal quality education for all, as the main lever for sustainable growth and for social justice, well-being and prosperity. Now is the time to reassert the value of research and knowledge creation as collective goods, the open process of knowledge sharing and exchange. In a time when the demand for public research into the cause of this crisis and into solutions is high, ETUCE reminds decision-makers of the centrality of publicly funded research based on academic freedom. ETUCE calls on governments and education authorities to ensure that technology in education develops in ways that enhance, rather than undermine, the public good. Now is the time to make sure that it is public need, and not private greed, that shapes the development of technology as a support for pedagogy, academic freedom and research.
14. **Education trade unions are ready to play their part in shaping, upholding and rebuilding equal and sustainable societies where education as a public good, with**

**the potential to make a real contribution to healthy and coherent societies, is an essential part of democracy. The market cannot deliver these goals. ETUCE believes and recalls that only education systems based on public service values and democratic governance can rise to the challenges that our societies face now. Education personnel, and their unions, are already playing a key role in confronting the current health emergency but we are also at the heart of a commitment to build a better world beyond the crisis.**

*\*The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 132 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.*