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ETUCE education priorities for the Annual Growth Survey (AGS) 2020

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The latest cycles of the European Semester¹, have placed a significant emphasis on the education sector. The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), the voice of 132 member organisations representing 11 million education workers, recommends that the following challenges and policy priorities be addressed in the 2020 Annual Growth Survey:

Free, universal, quality, public education is central to the full realization of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also helps to foster shared economic prosperity and to counter widespread social distress and dissatisfaction towards democratic structures in the EU. A decade-long focus on tight public finances and on faith in the market to serve society efficiently and effectively is eroding the capacity of public education, to enhance fairness in the development of economies.

Recent data from the OECD (2019) and Eurostat (2019) confirm that the lasting impact of investment cutbacks in education have been severe and that increases have not yet caught up with Europe's limited economic growth. Between 2010 and 2016, across OECD countries, public investment on educational institutions as a share of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased an average of 8% for non-tertiary levels and by 4% at tertiary level², despite the commitments made by the Heads of state or government in 2017, at the margins of the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth held in Gothenburg launching the European Education Area, to raise education investment levels. Similarly, Eurostat³ reports education expenditures as a percentage of the GDP falling from 5.2% in 2009 to 4.6% in 2017 in the EU and from 5% to 4.5% in the Euro area. Record low levels of investments are reported in Romania (2.8%), Ireland (3.3%), Bulgaria (3.6%), Slovakia, Italy (3.8%), and Greece (3.9%).

The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) focus on deficits has undermined future-oriented investment in public education and research, with the risk of damaging current and future generations as well as Europe's overall growth potential. The dangers of underinvestment in public education and basic research are clear: fewer skilled and less productive workers, lower productivity, and more limited personal and social development. This means lower overall living standards, a sharp rise in inequalities, an increase of social exclusion and an expansion of poverty and at-risk-of-poverty rates.

According to the OECD⁴, many educational systems are increasingly relying on the private sources of funding to compensate for setbacks in public investment. Between 2010 and 2016, across OECD countries, the share of private spending increased by 3 percentage points, while the share of public spending fell by about the same amount, with Estonia, Portugal, Spain and the UK increasing private support by more than 5% in that period of reference. Students and their families are the main source of private funding, raising major concerns

¹ Stevenson, H. (2018), The European Semester: an analysis of the 2017-2018 cycle, European Public Service Unions, University of Nottingham, European Social Observatory and ETUCE.

² OECD (2019), Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>

³ Eurostat (2019), European Pillar of Social Rights indicators, General government expenditure by function, [TEPSR_SP110]

⁴ OECD (2019), *Op. Cit.*

about equity in access to education. However, private involvement in the provision of education in the forms of private operation of public schools, education vouchers or scholarships and/or delivery of education by private providers indicate an increased reliance on the market rather than on public institutions subject to democratic control, to deliver public goods for society.

Policy shifts towards liberalisation and deregulation, the dominance of economic prerogatives over educational objectives, and promotion of reforms focusing on the marketable aspects of education and imposing commercial market standards and practices on public education institutions are endangering the ability of European countries to cope with domestic, regional, and global challenges. Shared economic prosperity, innovation and productivity, high living standards and quality employment need skills to adapt to future innovation-intensive jobs, including creativity, acceptance of diversity, ability to work with others and many other competencies. Public education is a counter-cyclical force to division in society in its ability to foster mutual understanding and social integration.

The creation and transmission of knowledge through research and innovation is an important engine to advance productivity and future growth. Almost all innovation rests on publicly funded basic research, then transmitted to industry to develop economically and commercially viable products. Underinvestment from the public sector, reform pressures to better align university outcomes and governance to the needs and wishes of business, as well as financial incentives to steer research, and therefore funding, to business priorities can undermine academic freedom, as well as the ability of universities as collegial bodies to foster basic research, including in such areas as the environment and social sciences, with the potential to curb long-term benefits for society and the economy.

The lack of equity in education, in the long term, perpetuates exclusion, segregation and marginalisation. Discriminatory factors have not been addressed adequately as shown by the OECD-PISA/Social Scoreboard indicators⁵. Socio-economic status remains associated with significant differences in performance in mathematics, reading, and science. On average across OECD countries, 12.9% of the variation in student performance is associated with socio-economic status, with recorded above-average variation levels in France, Hungary and Luxembourg (20%). Migrant and refugee students are more than twice as likely as non-migrant students of similar socio-economic background to underperform.

With existing and expected teacher shortages in more than two-thirds of EU countries⁶, the sustainability of education systems is in danger. Unattractive compensation and working conditions, limited career prospects, high-stake accountability, limited professional autonomy, and inadequate or insufficient initial education and continuous professional development programmes are among the main causes for the lack of attractiveness of the profession. Rural-urban and geographical divides within and between countries contribute to the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, especially in disadvantaged areas.

Policy priorities:

- **Reverse the decade-long trend of decreasing investment by increasing public investment in education and training to address inequalities in access to and provision of quality education and training;**
- **Revise the Stability and Growth Pact rules to allow for an EU fiscal framework that excludes from the calculation of the deficit and debt levels future-oriented education, training and basic research investment;**

⁵ OECD (2016), PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>

⁶ European Commission (2018), *Teaching Career in Europe*, Eurydice report

- Expand the revenue base to allow public investments, including through more effective tax collection, the control of tax fraud, corporate tax evasion and avoidance, as well as by imposing and enforcing rules to reduce fiscal dumping and financial speculation across and beyond Europe;
- Safeguard the public provision and governance of education systems from the influence of private sector investment and actors;
- Boost public investment in basic research and protect democratic collegial governance of universities and higher education institutions from the influence of private parties;
- Orient EU education and training funds towards reducing inequalities in educational access and opportunities according to the principles of solidarity between countries;
- Focus on equitable and quality, all-inclusive education and training systems through targeted measures focusing on the most disadvantaged, including migrant and refugee children;
- Develop comprehensive, holistic education investment and reform from early childhood education to university;
- Educate for sustainable development: develop a future-oriented, sustainable approach to skills, knowledge and competencies to foster understanding, stimulate critical thinking and social integration, and create a stable and secure environment in which the fruits of economic growth are more equally shared;
- Provide teachers with resources, tools, and professional space to make the profession more rewarding and attract talented people to it;
- Ensure real participation and consultation of education personnel and their organisations in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education policy.