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ETUCE Position on the

“Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Education for Environmental Sustainability”

Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 15-16 November 2021

Background

The key role of education and training in engaging with students, teachers, parents on the environmental challenges facing the planet has been highlighted by the [European Green Deal](#). In this context, the [EU's Biodiversity Strategy](#) announced that the Commission would propose in 2021 a **Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability** aiming to:

- integrate environmental issues in national education systems, including at the level of curricula, teacher education, pedagogies and learning environments.
- support learners to move from awareness of environmental issues to an understanding of these issues, empowering them to act.
- implement multidisciplinary and participatory approaches in education adapted to understanding and acting on environmental challenges.
- promote a whole-institution approach where sustainability is embedded in buildings and facility management, governance, partnerships and community relations.
- set out common principles on sustainability to guide implementation at national level and support cooperation and exchange of ideas and best practice at EU level.

Following a public consultation on a [Roadmap](#) which presented the European Commission's plans for this initiative (13 April-11 May, 2021), the second phase of the public consultation asked answers to concrete questions (18 June-24 September 2021) to which ETUCE and several member organisations answered. Based on the replies, the European Commission would present a proposal for *Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability* in November/December 2021.

The following position represents the viewpoints of ETUCE and its member organisations regarding the upcoming Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability and key aspects of its implementation in the education sector.



1. Climate and environment emergencies hugely influence the work of education institutions and challenge access to quality education. ETUCE reminds that **quality education is a fundamental human right and a public good enshrined in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#), [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and [the European Convention on Human Rights](#).**

2. In accordance with the ETUCE [Resolution For a sustainable future of Europe: the role of education trade unions in Europe in addressing education and environment for social change](#) (2021), ETUCE calls on the European Commission to base the Council Recommendation on the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and to remind each EU country to implement the first principle to ensure that high quality and inclusive education is a right for all with a view of preparing committed, responsible, critical-thinking and active citizens who are ready to preserve our planet for future generations.

3. Climate emergency and environmental issues require a drastic social change, including individual and collective changes in mentality, behaviour, lifestyle as well as in the social, political and economic organisation of EU countries and societies. It is essential to recognise the impact of climate change on the well-being of everyone. The ETUCE [Resolution For a sustainable future of Europe: the role of education trade unions in Europe in addressing education and environment for social change](#) (2021) underlines that environmental problems obstruct the learning and teaching processes and lead to **unsafe and inadequate working and learning environments** (e.g. hot classrooms, bad air quality in the classrooms mostly in the winter, periods when schools have to be closed or relocated due to changes in the environment).

4. **Education is a human right and public good.** Education for environmental sustainability requires a **fundamentally different learning and pedagogical approach**:

- Education for environmental sustainability needs to be **interdisciplinary learning** throughout all subjects and it should not only be part of democratic citizenship courses and natural science subjects.
- Education for environmental sustainability needs to be based on a **whole-institutional approach** where all education actors work together to be environmentally aware of maintaining “green schools” within a collaborative and democratic school leadership.
- Education for environmental sustainability needs to link to **concrete actions** within the participatory approach of being a democratic citizen and utilizing green skills and competences within the local community.

5. It is important to recognize that education alone cannot be responsible for fighting climate change. National environmental policies should be connected to national education policies. The management of the education system also needs to improve in order to embed sustainability to the education systems. Environmental education needs to be interdisciplinary in every education sector from early age, including in apprenticeships. Within the green transition of education and society, the existing school buildings, textbooks, teaching materials and guidelines, assessment methods and teacher training need to be updated for education for environmental sustainability. They must be revised together with education trade unions in **effective social**

dialogue in order to ensure good preparation and support to teachers, trainers, academics, and other education personnel (including school leaders) for this approach to education which is different from traditional approaches. Education trade unions have a key role in ensuring that not only is education about sustainable environmental development integrated into all levels and aspects of education systems, but also that it is accompanied by sustainable and adequate technical, financial and staff resources and that education staff receive the sufficient professional support. Currently, ETUCE member organisations [report](#) within a new project of the education trade unions entitled “**Education for Social Change: The role of Education Trade Unions in addressing sustainable environmental development**” that there is a significant **lack of coherence in the curricula** regarding education for sustainable development.

6. Teachers play a vital role in providing quality education and their contribution has proved essential within the COVID-19 crisis. However, the value of the teaching profession remains unrecognised and by no means should they 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** are of utmost importance to attract and retain high-qualified teachers and education staff and to ensure quality education. Sustainable and decent working conditions in the education sector also require that the infrastructure of education is built with a view to **creating supportive learning and teaching environments** that are climate-aware and environment-preserving. It is important to ensure investment to upgrade the **school buildings** in Europe to be sustainable. ETUCE regrets that the important issue of working conditions has been ignored in the European Commission’s Roadmap.

7. ETUCE insists that the European Commission’s initiative proposing the Council Recommendation encourages Member States to provide **effective support to teachers**¹ for the green transition of education and schools and to raise the status and promote the attractiveness of the teaching profession. In order to reduce carbon emission and to support the work-life balance of the teachers, the governments should ensure that teachers are employed in schools **near to their home** in order to reduce travelling to work. The importance of the attractiveness of the teaching profession has also been highlighted in the [Croatian EU Presidency Conference on teachers and trainers for the future: Towards the ‘New Normal’](#). ETUCE reminds that investing in the teaching profession means investment in quality education and in the well-being of all citizens.

8. **Quality and inclusive initial training and continuous professional development** of teachers, trainers, academics and other education personnel are key for the integration of environmental sustainability to education. Successful teaching needs to be based on quality and effective initial education of the teachers on sustainable development which should be inseparable from the nature of teaching. Teacher training needs to match the needs of teachers, be **accessible for free, be during their working time, and be supported by sustainable and adequate public funding**.

¹ European Economic and Social Committee (EESC): [Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all](#), 2020

9. While noting the importance of respecting national competence on curricula design, ETUCE also warns that teachers, trainers, academics and other education personnel need sufficient time and space within the curricula and teaching schedule to be able to implement the ‘hands-on’ and transversal approach to education for environmental sustainability. Such an approach includes going outside of the educational institution and to practice the green skills and competences and to link them also to the needs and specificities of the local community and students’ personal situations. It is important to recognise that interdisciplinary learning increases the **workload** of the teachers.

10. **Effective social dialogue** with the education trade unions and the **reinforcement of collective bargaining** are essential prerequisites to guarantee adequate salaries, pensions and good working conditions that match the increased demands for quality learning and for an attractive and rewarding teaching profession. The effective involvement of the education trade unions in the **design, assessment and implementation of national and European climate and education strategies** must be secured through social dialogue with the education trade unions. Developing green skills and competences needs to be linked to social and environmental responsibility and to creating a **green school culture** (EESC, 2020). This would change the traditional way of how education institutions are run and enforce democratic management of education institutions and collaborative leadership between leaders of education institutions, teachers, students and parents. ETUCE reminds that the integration of environmental and climate considerations in the education system should be achieved via effective social dialogue with teachers, academics, researchers, and other education personnel.

11. In the face of the greatest economic contraction of modern times, the forthcoming EU financial initiatives such as Next Generation EU, as well as **upcoming recovery plans** by national governments, should ensure that well-resourced education systems based on public service values and democratic governance are at the heart of a commitment to deliver on the Education 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and on the European Pillar of Social Rights. We remind that several **countries cut their education budget** despite the return to school from the COVID-19 crisis requiring even more investment than before. Budget cuts in public education within the green and digital transition of education are not appropriate and are unacceptable. The European Commission should continue to strictly monitor the public investment in education within the **European Semester** process. 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. In this context, education is the best tool to promote this change and it requires sufficient time, long term policy vision and sustainable public investment, in particular, in the framework of the [European Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) and the [NextGenerationEU](#) package. Moving towards environmental sustainability requires **solidarity** at all levels: among countries, regions, policymakers, education stakeholders and education institutions. ETUCE expects that the implementation of the Council recommendations at national level will be **closely monitored**.