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Executive summary

ETUCE study on *Education Trade Unions in Europe facing COVID-19 Omicron Variant*

March 2022

In light of the fast-spreading of the new Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus and several mobilisations and strikes organised by education trade unions across Europe, ETUCE* conducted a study on '*Education trade unions in Europe facing the COVID-19 Omicron variant*'. A short survey was open for feedback by all ETUCE member organisations from 10 February 2022 to 1 March 2022. The aim was to map the COVID-19 situation in the European region and the recent developments and challenges faced by teachers, academics, other education personnel, and their education trade unions at the current stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey gathered 47 responses from 41 countries, corresponding to 80% of countries where ETUCE is represented.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this study can only depict a momentary assessment of the situation. Due to the volatile and constantly shifting evolution of the COVID-19 infection rates in Europe, the situation at the start of the survey might not accurately reflect the situation towards the end of it. While a continuous temporal comparison would thus be interesting, it is not feasible in the current framework of the questionnaire.

The data collected through this study has shown that **the spread of the Omicron variant corresponded to a shift in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic** in most countries across Europe. While epidemiologists keep calling on prudence, several governments have announced a **new phase of the pandemic**, which resulted in the **lifting of many emergency measures** previously in place.

Education trade unions across Europe have been underlining the importance of **restoring in-presence teaching since the beginning of the pandemic**. Nevertheless, **there must be no compromise to health and safety in education institutions**. In this respect, the ETUCE study sheds light on **numerous challenges** still faced by teachers, academics, and other education personnel across Europe.

Most notably, as clearly emerges from this study, **the health and safety education institutions are not yet ensured**. While **increasing COVID-19 infections** have further disrupted educational activities, education trade unions also warned of the heavy

impact that the pandemic has been producing on **educational outcomes of students and the psychosocial risks of education workers and students**.

Against this backdrop, the **governments' answer** to the emergence of the COVID-19 Omicron variant has been perceived by ETUCE member organisations **as insufficient, inadequate, or chaotic**. Therefore, in many cases, the national measures did not only fall short in achieving their goal of reducing infection rates and ensuring health and safety, but they also imposed additional stress on teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

In light of a **general trend of dissatisfaction** towards the health and safety measures in the education sector, many ETUCE member organisations engaged in **negotiation, social dialogue with the government or lobbying actions** to improve the situation in the education sector. In some countries, where the demands of education trade unions remained ignored for a long time, ETUCE member organisations mobilised with **protests and strikes**, which eventually opened some dialogue with the governments. In general, it is observed that the **COVID-19 has contributed to worsening pre-existing challenges** in the education systems.

Regarding mandatory vaccination and other mandatory measures for the education sector, this emerged as an increasingly debated matter across Europe in 2021. However, the ETUCE study shows that the approach of **imposing mandatory measures has not taken hold across Europe**. Indeed, as of March 2022, it remains limited to a few countries. As a relevant outcome of this study, it is worth mentioning that a clear prevalent position of ETUCE member organisations on vaccination is outlined, with **the vast majority of members supporting a voluntary approach to vaccination**.

In conclusion, the ETUCE study shows that the **COVID-19 crisis is still far from being concluded** and keeps inflicting its negative impact on the education systems across Europe. The evidence presented in this report should, once more, make clear **the need for governments to address the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the education sector and engage in **concrete social dialogue with education trade unions to ensure a fair and equitable education-led recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in the short, medium, and long term**.

**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.*