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## ETUCE Position on a European comprehensive approach to Mental Health

*Adopted by the ETUCE Bureau on 7 February 2023*

### Background:

In the State of the Union address in September 2022, the European Commission announced a new initiative on mental health. This initiative responds to deep concerns expressed by the European society on deteriorating mental health in Europe, including from the trade union movement, the European Parliament and the Council, and the Conference of the Future of Europe. Therefore, as part of its work programme 2023, the EU Commission has planning on a **non-legislative Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health in Europe**, expected for the second quarter of 2023. The initiative is currently open to [public consultation](#) until from 18 January to 15 February 2023 to gather the view of relevant stakeholders.

ETUCE welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to address mental health with a comprehensive approach, as this is an urgent priority for education trade unions. The deteriorating mental health of teachers, academics, researchers, and other education personnel due to the growing impact of psychosocial risks and work-related stress is a significant concern undermining the attractiveness and status of the teaching profession. In this context, **ETUCE regrets the limited focus of this initiative on the work-related dimension of psychosocial risks and work-related stress**. ETUCE is also concerned as the European Commission is addressing occupational health and safety issues in a fragmented manner which weakens the effectiveness and the level of protection of education workers' safety and health. Therefore, ETUCE calls on the European Commission to adequately address mental health in the education sector by putting forward **a more ambitious and comprehensive legislative measure on work-related mental health, including psychosocial risks and work-related stress at work**. This initiative must be part of a comprehensive revision of the current framework legislation on health and safety at work, which is outdated and not adequate to provide effective protection to teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

There is wide research evidence showing how **work-related factors contribute significantly to the decline in mental health and well-being among education workers**. The *Eurobarometer 2022 study* found that over one-third of workers in Europe reported work-related overall fatigue, while 27% reported depression and anxiety caused or worsened by their job. **Teachers, academics, researchers, and other**

**education personnel are among the most affected professions by psychosocial hazards, which decrease the attractiveness of their profession and cause retention issues in the education systems across Europe.** Indeed, exposure to psychosocial stressors in education can lead to physical and psychological effects, lower self-efficacy for teaching, lower job satisfaction and lower commitment. Additionally, psychosocial factors are significant predictors of musculoskeletal disorders, the most prevalent cause of disability for education workers worldwide.

**European and national legislation on occupational health and safety, particularly stress at work, must guarantee a good working environment and mental health for teachers, academics, researchers, and other education personnel.** Nevertheless, while current European legislative measures in the occupational health and safety Framework Directive ([89/391/EEC](#)) and the [autonomous framework agreement](#) on work-related stress have proven insufficient to tackle the work-related psychosocial threats, only 60% of member states have specific legislation in place to address workplace bullying and violence. ETUCE is concerned that **the proposed initiative is not ambitious enough to produce a real impact and respond effectively to the needs of education workers facing escalating levels of psychosocial risks and stress.**

**Therefore, improving the work-related mental health of education workers requires comprehensive European legislation with a strong focus on prevention and effective measures to counter psychosocial risks and work-related stress in the workplace, with continuous involvement of education trade unions.** The initiative must include concrete obligations for employers to address the fundamental causes of psychosocial risks and must be coherent with existing employers' obligation to conduct regular risks assessment in the workplace, including necessary protective measures to be implemented (Article 9 of the Directive 89/391/EEC).

Furthermore, ETUCE emphasises that a European legislative measure on mental health must consider the interplay between evolving changes and psychosocial risks in the education sector. **Both the COVID-19 crisis and growing demands stemming from increasingly digitised education environments significantly affected the mental health of education workers as they have been left without adequate support.** As the use of digital tools in education activities has become widespread at all levels of education without a coherent implementation plan which adequately considers the working conditions and the professional needs of teachers, issues relating to the right to disconnect, increasing cyberviolence and harassment and bullying have resulted in an unsustainable burden for the teaching profession and poor retention rates in the education sector across Europe. Amid health, economic, and the financial crisis, worsening working conditions, increased workloads, and pedagogical challenges related to online and blended learning, job losses, as well as the increase of precarity and casualisation of staff, had an overall detrimental impact on the mental health of education workers.

**These challenges have contributed to undermining the status and attractiveness of the teaching profession in Europe.** According to the *"Eurofound Study Living, Working and Covid-19"*, during the pandemic, education ranked as the sector with the highest work quantitative demands, with 1 in 3 education workers feeling exhausted and emotionally drained due to their workers. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the described challenges led to the exhaustion of education workers with a severe shortage of teachers in many European countries and unprecedented cases of burnouts, resignations, and early retirement.

Addressing the **long-term impact of COVID-19 on the mental health** of education workers is also essential for a European initiative on mental health. Regarding COVID-19 as an occupational disease, workers in the education sector have been found more at risk of contracting the Long-COVID syndrome, which has proved to be associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. In this light, the absence of a clear responsibility for employers to safeguard the mental health of education workers is unjustified. In this context, **ETUCE demands further research to assess the impact of COVID-19 and increasing digital education teaching and learning environments on the mental health of workers in education**. Finally, in light of the underreporting of mental health issues among workers, including in the education sector, ETUCE emphasises the need to enhance the mental health literacy of education workers to counter social stigma around work-related mental health issues as well as to raise awareness on the importance of health and safety measures and risk assessment in education.

*\*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.*