

# PRACTICAL GUIDE

## FOR AN EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF EDUCATION TRADE UNIONS IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO BETTER INFLUENCE  
EDUCATION REFORMS AND INVESTMENT IN YOUR COUNTRY

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# PREFACE

The European Economic Governance coordination, referred to as the European Semester, and in particular the Country Specific Recommendations, have become crucial for national reforms and financing of public education systems across Europe. In the last few years, some trends have emerged in the education and training policy coordination and making which require trade unions in education to take further actions and to strengthen their involvement in the European Semester.

Domestic politics, the dramatic impact of the economic recession and EU budgetary constraints have contributed to accelerate reforms by means of the European Semester. The financial situation resulting from the economic crisis, and the continuous demands to bring down public debt and to pursue fiscal consolidation in the framework of the European Semester, has led to deep cuts in public education and training. The strict economic coordination and budget surveillance has also encouraged governments to look for other ways of financing education e.g. by promoting public/private partnership in education or by widening the space for private, commercial and financial actors in education.

In that context, ETUCE is committed to do everything in its power to ensure that European and national policy-makers adopt and implement appropriate policies to fully guarantee European citizens' human right for education by developing high quality, equitable and sustainable education systems in Europe.

This handbook fits the purpose of supporting ETUCE member organisations' national strategies to influence the various phases of the European Semester. It is intended as reference and resource for education trade union officers. It is not, however, a one-size-fits-all recipe book which can be used without taking into further consideration national sets. We believe that through a meaningful involvement in defining the objectives of budget allocations for education and training and in all stages of the education and training reform process within the European Semester, education trade unions could reassert their character of collective representation of the interests of teachers and educators.

Thanking all member organisations for their contributions, we hope you find the handbook useful and wish you every success in your efforts to strengthen your meaningful involvement in the European Semester on education and training.

Susan Flocken  
European Director

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## WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The European Semester is best described as a governance mechanism which provides an overview of EU Member States as they work towards meeting the objectives of the EU's 10-year plan *Europe 2020*.

*Europe 2020*'s headline targets relate to 5 key areas – employment/growth, investment, climate change, education and poverty/social inclusion.

Underneath these targets, *EU2020* commits Member States to ensuring fiscal responsibility, boosting investment and promoting structural reforms.

The European Semester is principally a process of monitoring and surveillance of Member States in relation to the *EU2020* objectives. However, it also has a wider remit in terms of providing recommendations intended to secure these objectives. Through the various phases of the Semester, each year, the EU institutions scrutinize and guide national economic, fiscal, and social policies especially within the Euro Area, however, all EU-Member States and EU-candidate countries are affected by the process.

The Semester was established in 2011 as part of a package of reforms intended to assert closer scrutiny of Member States' finances following the economic crisis. Before the crash, budgetary policy and planning was the responsibility of Member States 'with only a limited coordinated overview at EU level of the national efforts' (European Commission, 2015).

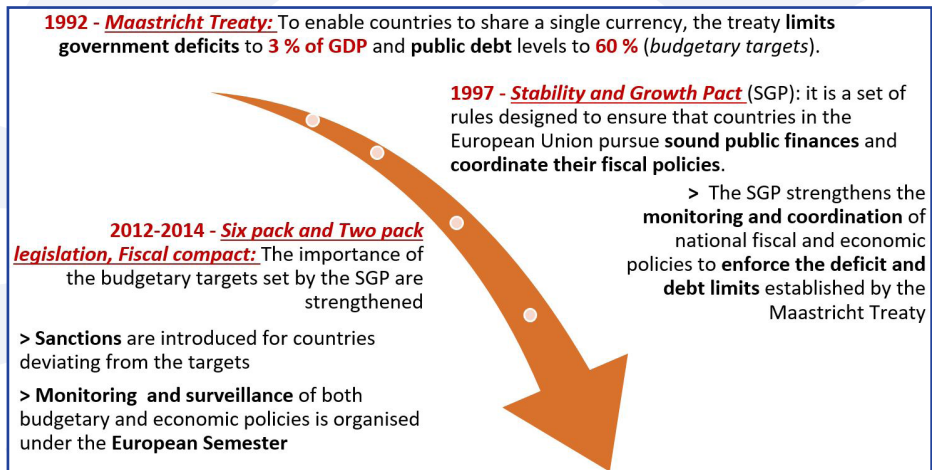
According to the European Commission:

*The European Union has set up a yearly cycle of economic policy coordination called the European Semester. Each year, the Commission undertakes a detailed analysis of EU Member States' plans of budgetary, macroeconomic and structural reforms and provides them with country specific recommendations for the next 12-18 months. These recommendations also contribute to the objectives of the EU's long term strategy for jobs and growth, the Europe 2020 strategy, which is implemented and monitored in the context of the European Semester."*

*It also monitors EU countries' efforts towards the "Europe 2020" targets*

They EU's key rules relating to fiscal policy and deficit management were established by the [Stability and Growth Pact](#) (1997). However, since the economic crisis more attention has focused on enforcing these rules, and creating the legislative and governance structures to manage this process. For example, legislative packages known as the [Six Pack](#) (2011), [Two Pack](#) (2013) and the [Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union](#) (2012) have all strengthened the mechanisms to ensure budgetary targets are met, with the possibility of sanctions if SGP rules are transgressed.

**Figure 1 - Budgetary surveillance within the European Semester**



The European Semester is the governance mechanism that seeks to coordinate these different monitoring processes. Given the priorities established by the economic crisis the focus has, for some years, been on the implementation of the EU's budgetary and fiscal targets, by enabling EU Member States to coordinate their economic policies throughout the year and to address the economic challenges facing the EU.

In 2015, the new European Commission initiated the so-called [revamped European Semester](#), allowing for greater involvement of the European Parliament and national legislatures, as well as social partners and stakeholders at all levels. In parallel, the focus has gradually shifted from economic and budgetary surveillance to a more socially oriented economic governance,



based on boosting investment, growth and jobs across the EU, pursuing structural reforms in several policy areas, and on a greater integration of all the Europe 2020 Strategy targets into the European Semester.

## European Semester, the first phase: 2011-2014



- **Objective:** Synchronize and **coordinate instruments and procedures** related to **budgetary and economic policy**.
- **What:** The European Semester is a coordination mechanism established in order to **restore stability/convergence** in those countries whose **national budgets and economic policy** are not in line with medium-term **macroeconomic and fiscal objectives**.
- **Procedure/Instruments:** From its setting, the European Semester entails a **common timeline** for setting and approving national budgets and introduces **recommendations** on fiscal, macroeconomic policies and structural reforms for Member states.
- **Countries involved:** EU Member States  
Countries **not involved:** EFTA, EU candidate countries



## European Semester 2014 – on wards: from mere **budget surveillance** towards a '**socially oriented**' economic governance

All Member States have committed to achieving **Europe 2020 targets**, and have translated them into **national targets** reflecting different national situations circumstances.

The EU has more and more **integrated these targets** within the yearly cycle of economic policy coordination (**European Semester**).

Europe 2020 targets:

1. Employment
2. R&D / innovation
3. Climate change / energy
4. **Education**
  - Reducing **school drop-out rates below 10%**
  - at least **40% of 30-34-year-olds** completing **third level education**
5. Poverty / social exclusion





## WHY SHOULD EDUCATION TRADE UNIONS GET INVOLVED IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER?



*The European Semester can look like a cycle of big set piece events, with relatively few opportunities for education trade unions to be involved. Education trade unions should make every effort to 'push the door open' early in the process. Developing relationships with the European Semester Officer is a key way to make sure that the views of education trade unions are known, and that unions are invited to be involved at all the key points.*

The European Semester has a sharp focus on economic policy priorities, and monitoring the fiscal performance of Member States. However, it is also about much more than this. Education policy features prominently in the process, and there is the potential to have a significant influence on policies that impact students and teachers across all phases of education. Below are some of the reasons education trade unions need to be able to influence the Semester process.

- The Semester's focus on fiscal policy in Member States has a considerable impact on public investment levels. This impacts public expenditure on education, with all the consequences for providing quality education for all. The Semester provides an opportunity to make the case for increased public investment, and in particular in education services.
- *EU2020* has key targets relating to education, and these are also reflected in the recommendations that are presented to Member States through the Semester process. Education-related recommendations feature very prominently in the European Semester. For example, in 2014 every EU country that was involved in the European Semester process received recommendations relating to education. In every year of the Semester a majority of countries have received education-related recommendations. Recommendations can range across every sector of education, from Early Childhood Education through to Higher Education and Research. The Semester represents an opportunity to make the case for education policies that are a priority for education trade unions to become recommendations to Member States.





- Education-related recommendations need to reflect the voice of educators and the professional expertise of teachers and associated education workers. It is the nature of the Semester process that many education-related recommendations are general in nature. A typical example would be Slovakia in 2016 which received a recommendation to *'Facilitate the employment of women, in particular by extending the provision of affordable, quality childcare'*. It is for Member States to determine the detail of this policy as they implement the recommendation. Clearly there are options, some of which might have a more or less positive impact on achieving *'quality'* childcare. The Semester is an opportunity for the professional voice of educators to be inserted into the policy process.

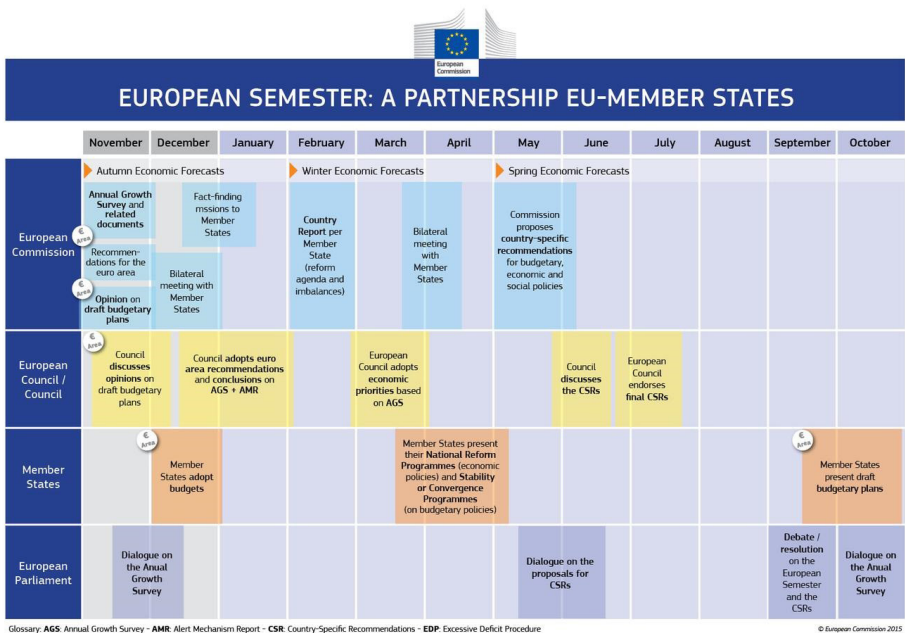
In summary, it is important for education trade unions to engage with the European Semester because it is a key policy process with the potential for considerable impact on education policy in Member States. The Semester process provides an opportunity, or what Lawn and Grek (2012) refer to as a 'policy space', to shape the education policy discourse in Member States. This is not necessarily easy, and there are many reasons why the involvement of education trade unions in social dialogue relating to the Semester is not as embedded as it might be. However, there are opportunities to make an important impact on policy. The purpose of this Toolkit is to help education trade unions maximise that opportunity.



# HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER WORK?

In this section we explain how the Semester works as a process. The term ‘Semester’ usually refers to a year divided into two parts. The European Semester can be considered as two parts when a distinction is made between an EU level ‘policy development’ phase, and a Member State level ‘implementation phase’. This is probably too simplistic in reality and in the discussion below the process is presented in four, overlapping phases.

By understanding the key features of the process, and the schedule when these take place, it is possible to develop a clear understanding of how the process works. In the following description we have highlighted the **key features**, and the **dates** they take place, in bold type.



Source: Presentation delivered by the European Semester Officer to the ETUCE Training Seminar in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 16-17 January 2017



## KEY TIMING

### PHASE 1: THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS AND THE ANNUAL GROWTH SURVEY

**State of the Union** - Every year in **September**, the President of the European Commission delivers a 'State of the Union' speech before the European Parliament, taking stock of achievements of the past year and presenting priorities for the year ahead. The President also sets out how the Commission will address the most pressing challenges the European Union is facing. The speech is followed by a plenary debate. This kick-starts the dialogue with Parliament and Council to prepare the Commission Work Programme for the following year. Anchored in the Treaty of Lisbon, the State of the Union address is foreseen in the 2010 Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission.

**Annual Growth Survey** - Many accounts of the European Semester indicate it starts in **November** with the publication of the **Annual Growth Survey** (AGS). This sets out the Commission's global overview of the EU, and its assessment of future prospects and challenges. It can be seen as 'setting the agenda' for the Semester cycle. The Commission President's 'State of the Union' address to the European Parliament signposts the key themes that form the substance of the AGS. Although published in November, the initial work on this aspect of the Semester commences as early as July/August with a review of the previous year.

Given legislative changes the AGS now needs to be seen as one part of an '**Autumn Package**' of reports which are key to the Semester process, some of which relate only to Eurozone countries. At the same stage **Alert Mechanism Reports** (AMR) are published for countries which are considered 'at risk' in terms of potential economic imbalances and countries may be identified as requiring an **In Depth Review** (IDR).

## PHASE 2: THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING MONITOR AND THE COUNTRY REPORTS

**Education and Training Monitor** (ETM) is a report published each year in **November**. Education is a ‘national competence’ within EU treaties, which means it is a matter for Member States. The EU has no legislative power to compel member states to undertake any actions in relation to education policy. That said, education forms one of the headline targets within *EU2020*, and alongside this sits a framework for promoting cooperation in education, known as *Education and Training 2020 (ET2020)*. *ET2020* (and the ETM) technically sit outside of the European Semester process. However, they can feed into the Semester process by providing the data for official Semester reports. *ET2020* is described as:

*... a forum for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms*<sup>1</sup>.

The annual ETM therefore, which comprises an EU-wide analysis and country-by-country reports, provides key evidence as the Semester process shifts from the global outlook of the AGS, to the country specific focus of subsequent stages.

**Country Reports** are published by the Commission in **February**. The ‘baseline’ for each Country Report is the previous year’s Semester, and the progress that has been made in relation to issues raised and recommendations made. Country reports appear as ‘following on’ from the publication of the AGS as the next stage of the cycle. In reality, work on the reports commences in September/October and occurs alongside the development of the AGS.

Reports are prepared by the ‘country team’ for each country. This team is formed of a core group, in which key Directorates are represented (including DGEAC), plus an extended team of those with less direct involvement, but who nevertheless can be expected to input into the report. In some cases, specialists might be drafted for particular expertise.

The country report involves on-going dialogue between the country team and the Member State during the drafting phase. Around December there is a formal Fact Finding Mission in which the Commission visit the Member State to engage with stake holders. These discussions can then feed into shaping the Country Report.

<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework_en)



## PHASE 3: THE NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMMES AND THE STABILITY/CONVERGENCE REPORTS

**Bilateral meetings** between the European Commission and national authorities and relevant stakeholders occur following the issue of the Country Reports and in-depth reviews, and the Councils' discussions regarding these documents. The Vice-Presidents and Commissioners visit the Member States in order to meet the governments, national parliaments, social partners and other stakeholders. The meetings are an occasion for involved actors to cooperate on the preparation of the National Reform Programmes and Stability and Convergence Programmes.

**National Reform Programmes** (NRP) can be considered as the formal response of the Member States to the issues raised in the Country Report. It can be considered as a plan of action, or statement of intent, in which each Member State responds to the issues identified in the Country Report and sets out how it intends to address them. In this sense, the NRF can be considered as the point at which responsibility begins to pass from the Commission to individual countries. The Commission has no formal role in the drafting of national reform programmes. Given the centrality of economic issues, lead responsibility for drafting NRPs usually sits within the key strategic finance ministries in each Member State. Ministries of Education input on an 'as necessary' basis, which may depend on the extent to which education issues have featured in the Country Report, or previous recommendations. NRPs are submitted to the Commission by **May** of each year.

**Stability and Convergence Programmes** are published each month of **April**. Member States are laying out their fiscal plans for the following three years, complying with the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. Eurozone Members publish Stability Programmes, whereas non-Eurozone members publish Convergence Programmes. The Stability and Convergence Programmes are comprised of the Medium-Term Objectives, which are budgetary targets set for each Member States, defined in structural terms. Member States are required to set out yearly targets on their expected progress towards the Medium-Term Budgetary Objectives, and to lay out an estimated forecast of the path of their debt-to-GDP ratios. Additionally, Stability and Convergence Programmes include economic assumptions about growth, employment, inflation and other economic variables, a description and assessment of policy measures to achieve the programmes objective, an analysis of how changes in the main economic assumptions would affect the budgetary and debt position, and information covering several years including: one

year of budgetary execution, the current budgetary year, and plans for the three following years. In case targets are not being met, Member States are expected to provide explanations.

Both the Stability and Convergence Programmes are used by the Commission and finance ministers to assess the sustainability of Member States' Medium-Term Budgetary Objectives (MTOs) regarding the two following pillars: structural balance analysis and the expenditure benchmark.

## PHASE 4: THE COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

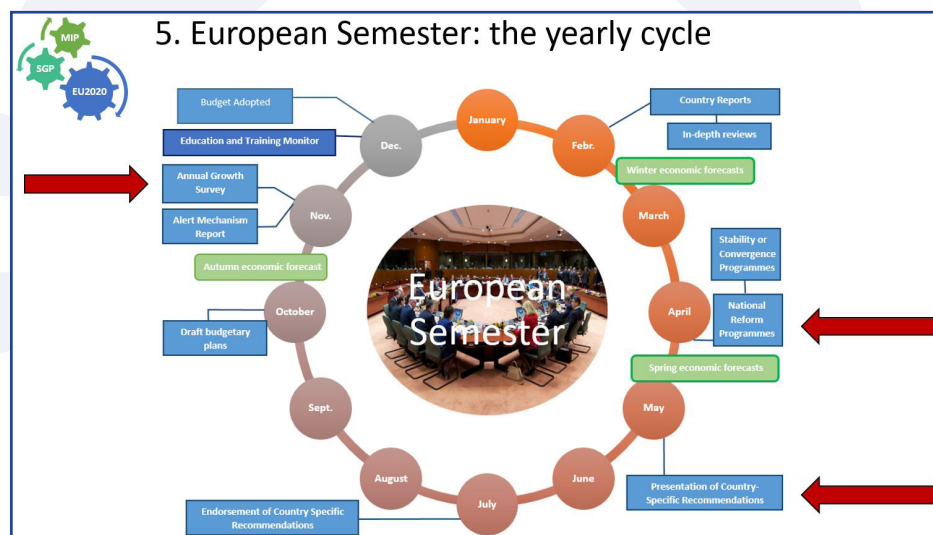
**Country Specific Recommendations** (CSRs) represent the key action points of the European Semester. As soon as Country Reports are published, and as Member States are working on their NRFs, work commences on the most obviously political element of the process, the drafting of Country Specific Recommendations. These are formal outcomes from the Commission-driven element of the Semester and they constitute the expected actions Member States are expected to implement over the next 12-18 months. Recently a formal decision has been taken to limit the number of CSRs made, and these are now typically three per country. Initial discussion about the CSRs takes place within the Commission's country teams, taking account of the responses received to the Country Reports and the content of the NRPs. There can be no CSR which does not feature in the Executive Summary of the relevant Country Report. However, there is obviously an intense period of discussion in which all potential CSRs are prioritised in a short-listing process. In our research these were described as 'difficult discussions' by one Commission representative, in which different DGs seek to protect and advance the agendas of their own Directorate. Protocols exist for conducting these discussions. As the fine detail of the short list is refined, and reflecting the political importance of the CSRs, the level of decision-making is escalated, with final 'sign off' at the highest level of the Commission. CSRs are discussed with Member States in the Council, and the Council makes a formal endorsement in July.

In many ways the CSRs can be seen as the quintessential expression of the European Semester's 'soft governance' (Bieber, 2016). There is no legislative (hard) power to direct Member States in the Semester. There are powers to direct specific economic policy actions, or to sanction those who transgress rules on deficit management. However, these sit outside the Semester itself, which is a form of governance. On issues outside these prescribed areas the Commission has no power to direct. As one Commission official indicated, there are no sanctions for those who



do not implement their recommendations and no visible 'naming and shaming'. However, the CSRs are presented as being 'co-produced' between the Commission and Member States and therefore these are conceived as 'shared priorities'. Hence CSRs are intended to represent an alignment of the Commission's recommendations with the Member State's priorities. Member States are at liberty to reject or ignore recommendations, but the conventional wisdom within the Commission would question why any Member State would want to reject recommendations that have been jointly agreed.

**Figure 2** Source: Infographic elaborated by ETUCE and presented during the project's Training Seminars 2016-2017



*Country Specific Recommendations, especially education recommendations, are not crafted in dark rooms in Brussels and crudely imposed on Member States. They are the outcome of on-going dialogue between the Commission and national governments. Influencing the Semester shouldn't be seen as separate to influencing national education policy but as another space in which education trade unions can frame the narrative about public education in their country. The challenge for education trade unions is to open up this space, and to make sure that the voice of educators is clearly heard. This is what will make the European Semester more transparent and the European Union more democratic.*

## KEY ACTORS

In order to fully understand the European Semester, its core elements and to be able to fully and meaningfully engage with it, we need to identify all the stakeholders involved in the decision making process and understand their various interests.

**European Council** - The European Council is constituted of the 28 EU Member States' Heads of State or governments. The EU Council is a steering political body within the process of policy-making in the EU, as it defines the general political orientations. In the context of the European Semester, the European Council provides the policy orientations on fiscal, macroeconomic and structural reforms in March. In that period, it also adopts the economic priorities based on the Annual Growth Survey. In July, the European Council formally endorses the Country Specific Recommendations.

**Council of the EU** - The Council of the European Union (or the Council) is an Institution comprising the 28 Member States national ministers of various portfolios. The Council is divided into ten thematic formations. The ECOFIN Council, for instance, unites the 28 ministers of economic and financial affairs, in order to decide on issues regarding these topics. Consequently, the ECOFIN Council is the main lead in the Council's actions related to the European Semester. In November, it discusses the European Commission's opinions on Member States budgetary plans. It adopts conclusions on the Annual Growth Surveys and the Alert Mechanism Report, as well as the Euro-area recommendations in December. The Council also discusses the Commission's Country Specific Recommendations drafts in June, and adopts them after the endorsement of the European Council.

**European Commission** - The European Commission is the independent Institution that holds the monopoly on legislative initiative. As such, it is regarded as one of the most important European Institutions, and undertakes a key role in the shaping of the European Semester. Each September/October, the Commission delivers a detailed analysis of each country's plans for budget, macroeconomic and structural reforms. On the basis of these documents, it publishes the Annual Growth Survey and the Alert Mechanism Report in November, and conducts fact-finding missions in the Member States in December and January. The data collected is used to issue the Country reports in February. Finally, in May, the Commission publishes the Country Specific Recommendations valid for the next 12 to 18 months. In case of Member States' non-compliance, it can issue warnings.





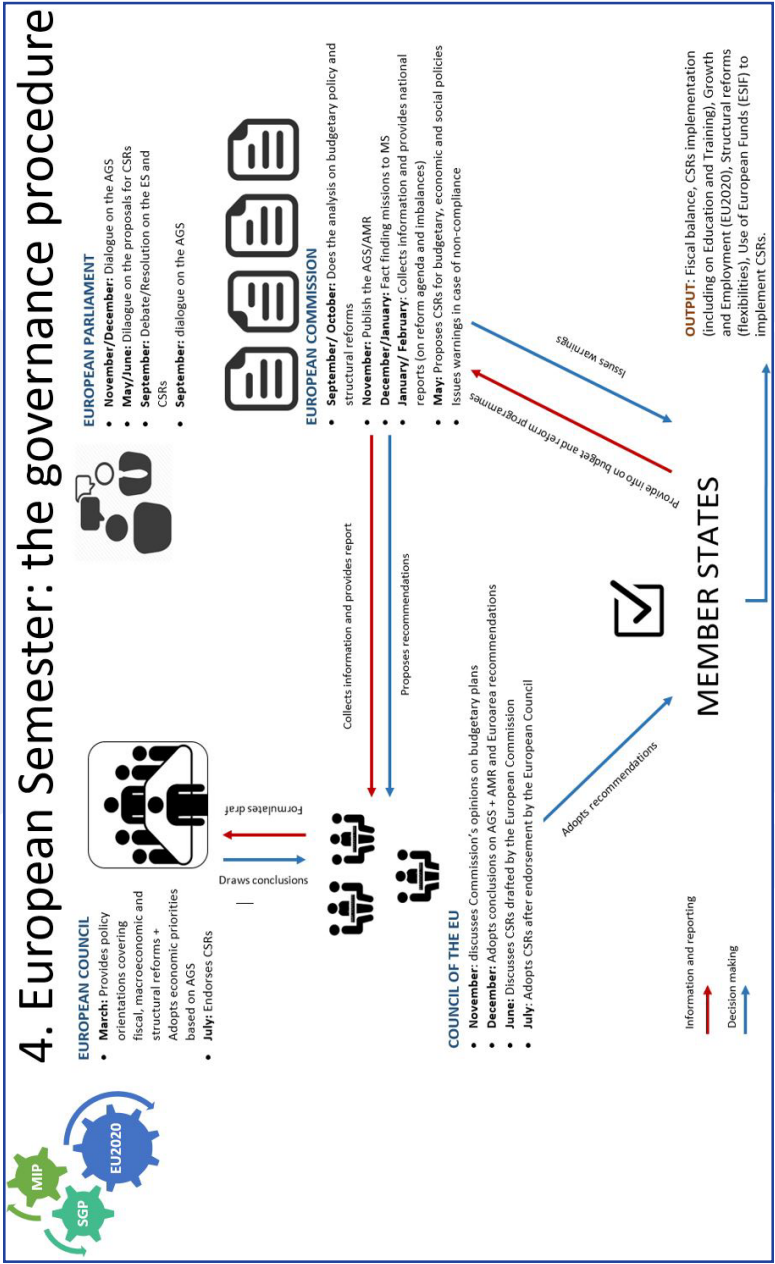
The Commission has a **European Semester Officer** (ESO) in each Member State. This person is line managed from the EC's Secretary General's office, but is based within the country for which they are responsible. Their role is to support the work of the country team based in Brussels. The ESO can be considered as the 'ear on the ground' of the country team. They provide a two-way communication between the Commission and Member State government, as well as liaising with social partners and stakeholders, for example organising meetings with country team representatives.

**European Parliament** – The European Parliament is the co-legislator on most European legal decisions along with the Council of the EU. In the process of the European Semester, the Parliament is involved through the economic dialogue. It conducts various discussions in parallel to key events throughout the European Semester process: in November and December, at the occasion of the Annual Growth Survey, and in May and June, at the occasion of the proposal of Country Specific Recommendations. The Parliament also organises debates and publishes resolutions on the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations in the month of September, period during which it also starts a dialogue on the upcoming Annual Growth Survey for the next cycle.

**National Governments** - National Governments are the recipients of the policy recommendations issued during the European Semester. Therefore, they are invited to submit their National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes in the months of March and April to the European Commission. The national governments are also expected to incorporate their Country Specific Recommendations into their reform plans and national budgets for the following year from August to October.

**Social Partners** - National and European Social Partners have been increasingly involved in the process of the European Semester, and the role of social dialogue in the shaping of the European Semester has been reaffirmed by European Commission and its President, Jean-Claude Juncker. It is however important to note that the part played by social partners has never been formally defined. Consequently, the degree of involvement of social partners varies greatly depending on the willingness of Member States and the quality of the tradition of social dialogue in each country. Theoretically, social partners are to be consulted by the European Commission, through its Representations in each Member State, ahead of the publication of the Annual Growth Survey in November, as well as the Country Reports in January/February

and Country-Specific Recommendations in May/June. Social partners are additionally expected to be involved by national governments in the process of designing the national reform and stability/convergence programmes in March/April.





## MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER



*In the aftermath of the economic crisis the European Semester appeared adversarial and punitive. The Commission has since committed to a 'new start' for social dialogue in which social partners are integrally involved in policy development. What this 'new start' amounts to in reality is, as yet, unclear. But it is undoubtedly an opportunity for education trade unions to make sure that their voice is heard at all the key points in the European Semester process.*

The European Semester is an important process, with significant implications for all aspects of education across every Member State. It is essential for education trade unions to engage with this process in order to shape it. This toolkit is focused on supporting ETUCE member organisations to channel their efforts to be able to make a difference in the Semester process. Before presenting practical steps to achieve this, we set out the various ways in which the European trade union movement, and ETUC and ETUCE in particular, seek to influence the process at a European level. Here are several examples to illustrate the kind of involvement and contribution:

The yearly actions of **European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)** -

- In the month of September, each year, ETUC publishes a document, entitled "ETUC for Growth and Social Progress: Priorities for the Annual Growth Survey (AGS)" providing input to the **Annual Growth Survey**, which sets the priorities of the European Semester of the following year.
- The ETUC has established a platform of **Trade Union Semester Liaison Officer** nominated by national trade union confederations who provide information to the ETUC during several phases of the Semester on the national settings and policy developments. They pro-actively contribute with their views to the consultations with the national European Semester Officers from the European Commission in charge of elaborating the national Country Reports. Moreover, they receive timely information on the various phases and documents produced and discussed at European level.

- Twice a year, the ETUC takes part in the **Tripartite Social Summit**, which is a forum for dialogue between the EU Institutions Presidents and European social partners. The Tripartite Social Summit is the occasion for representatives of trade unions and employers' organisations to meet and exchange views with European decision-makers on a wide range of matters concerning socio-economic policies in Europe.
- The **Country Reports** and the **Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)**. In this regard, ETUC works at both national and European level to represent the voice and interests of workers: ETUC firstly supports its affiliates in terms of their exercising of influence on the drafting of Country Reports and collects national inputs for the "Report on Trade Union Inputs for Early-Stage Consultation on Country Reports". National trade union confederation then provide their views to the ETUCE on the CSRs in light of their national experiences and contexts. ETUC then uses its platform to raise awareness amongst national and European decision-makers to the views of national member organisations on the published Country Reports and CSRs and their implementation by national governments.

Yearly, the **European Trade Union Committee for Education (CSEE-ETUCE)** provides relevant information for the education sector and voices education trade unions challenges and priorities by:

- Providing ETUCE **views on the Annual Growth Survey** for the forthcoming year embedding analysis of main challenges and policy priorities which could affect the education sector across Europe
- Participating to the **High-level Social Dialogue** with the European Commission, DG Education and Culture (DG EAC), on *the Education and Training Monitor*, which includes policy priorities for the EU to reach the targets of the *Europe 2020* Strategy and national country reports on education and training;
- Calling ETUCE member organisations to participate to consultative meetings with desk-officers from the European Commission, DG EAC, in charge of drafting **country reports** on education and training in the frame of the **Education and Training Monitor report**
- Calling ETUCE member organisations to arrange consultations with the relevant officers in charge at national level from the Ministry of Education in charge of contributing to the **National Reform Programmes** and implementation of the **Country**



## Specific Recommendations

- Calling ETUCE member organisations to coordinate with **national trade union confederations consultation** and meetings with the European Semester Officer at national level on the general priorities including those on education and training;
- Advocating for sufficient, effective and sustainable public investment in education to be excluded from the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) – the **'golden rule for public investment'**, therefore advocating for alternative measures to austerity and fiscal consolidation policies;
- Coordinating and discussing relevant policy initiatives with ETUC in the frame of the ETUC Working Groups;
- Coordinating and discussing the relevant policy initiative in the frame of the European Semester which have sufficient common ground for discussion with the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) in the frame of the **European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education** (ESSDE);
- **Building alliances** at European level with other Trade Union Federations and civil society organisations (such as the EU Alliance for a Democratic, Social and Sustainable European Semester) who advocate for a more democratic European Semester, the need to protect public goods and for public investment as well as quality education for all.

However, if this process is to be really effective then the work outlined above must align with, and be complemented by, the **work of education trade unions at Member State level**.

In the following section we identify five formal points at which **education trade unions** can shape the Semester process:

1. **The Annual Growth Survey** – From a social dialogue perspective ETUC can be considered as the principal policy actor representing workers' organisations, with national confederations feeding into this debate. This discussion, and some of its concerns, can seem remote from the interests of teachers and their unions but its importance should not be underestimated. The AGS can be considered to set the parameters within which

subsequent Semester processes are framed. Hence, in recent years, both social partners, employers' and workers' organisations, have highlighted the need for public investment to drive the recovery, and there is evidence of this being acknowledged in the President's State of the Union speech and the subsequent AGS. ETUCE member organisations should be aware of the key elements of this process (the 'State of the Union' address, as well as the AGS) and be in communication with both ETUCE and their own confederations to make sure their views are represented. At this point however debate is at a cross EU level (rather than being country or sector specific).

2. **Education and Training Monitor** – as indicated, is not formally part of the European Semester, however it is connected. The ETM is produced by DG EAC and it is likely that the Education Desk Officer within the Semester Country Team is also involved in the production of the ETM. Certainly the ETM provides a key data source for the Semester's Country Report. The Commission will often call meetings in Member States, to discuss the ETM for that country. Such meetings may not be part of the Semester's formal social dialogue processes, however, they are opportunities to shape the discourse around education policy priorities within Member States; these discourses, in turn, impact discourses within the Semester process. Engaging with such meetings, and thinking carefully about how to approach them (deciding on key messages, formulating strong evidence based arguments), were identified in the research as important by EU officials.
3. **The Country Report** – this is the key document in terms of determining the Country Specific Recommendations. It is clearly considered by many in the Commission as at the centre of the Semester process. The formal opportunity to influence this is when members of the country team make in-country fact-finding visits (usually December). These are short visits, attended by different members of the country team where the team meet the various Member State government officials, but also meet with stakeholders. This will usually include meeting with social partners, but this may not extend to meeting beyond the national union confederation(s). Education trade unions may, or may not be invited, depending on the local issues, and sometimes on the extent to which they are pro-active in seeking an invitation. Securing involvement in this part of the process is key, bearing in mind that country specific recommendations always emerge from the Country Report.
4. **National Reform Programme** – this is the response of Member States to their own Country Report. In the research, it emerged as a part of the Semester process with only limited social partner engagement. It comes across as a bureaucratic and technical exercise in which national government civil servants are required to draft a response to the Country Reports. Even with earlier publication of the Country Reports, as is now the



case, civil servants in Member States are under considerable pressure to produce a complex response in a short period of time. Social partners appear to be either forgotten in this process, or intentionally side-lined. Given the potential importance of the NRF in terms of setting out the Member State response to the Country Reports it would seem to be an important opportunity for social partners to be involved in process. We identified some examples of where this has happened (see individual country case studies), although these tended to be limited.

**5. Country Specific Recommendations** – identified by Commission officials as the third point in the formal Semester cycle where the Commission commits to promoting social dialogue (the other two points being the AGS and the Country Report). Following publication of draft CSRs there is further opportunity to discuss these and influence content. However, the research highlighted that at this point these are high level and high stakes discussions where it is difficult for those outside of national governments and the European Commission to affect change. Much effort, including managing political expectations, has already been expended, and there is a reluctance to make any changes other than those considered absolutely necessary to secure safe passage through the Council. Social dialogue at this stage appears to be more about communicating messages, than about listening and responding. Input from education trade unions is possibly best considered as about placing a tactical marker for the next round of the Semester, which, behind the scenes, is already getting underway.

In addition to all of the above it is important to emphasise the **need to develop informal networks and channels of communication**. This may not always be possible, and personalities can play a key role here. However what emerged as a strong message from the research informing this toolkit was the need to develop on-going informal relationships with key actors in order to communicate key messages.

In this process the European Semester Officer (who organises the local stakeholder meetings) and the Desk Officer representing the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) were both identified as key personnel with whom it was important to build relationships. The stakeholder meetings (such as fact finding mission meetings) are an important formal part of the process, but they are necessarily limited in impact. They are quite brief, and as one

Commission representative said, *'we already know the key issues before we arrive'*. By this time it is likely that Desk Officers are looking to 'test' their ideas and assessments rather than look for new agendas. Influencing the Country Report requires early, on-going and often informal contact.








*Alliances are important, and sometimes unusual. In our study, we saw how an education trade union worked with their Education Ministry, and used recommendations from the Semester, to put pressure on the Finance Minister to increase investment in education. Semester recommendations can be as much an opportunity as a threat.*





## DEVELOPING SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER – KEY POINTS FOR EDUCATION TRADE UNIONS

-  **Shape the discourse** – the European Semester is more a process of agenda shaping than traditional collective bargaining. Education trade unions need a clear narrative and a long-term vision with clarity of messages. In education policy terms the Semester is often concerned with the big picture, rather than small detail. Education trade unions need to frame their work accordingly.
-  **Have a plan** – it is important to see the Semester as a long-term process. Education trade unions need to have a clear plan about when and how to intervene in the process, seeing the cycle in the whole rather than intervening in a piece meal and ad hoc way.
-  **The European Semester: focus on the beginning** – the ‘direction of travel’ of the European Semester is set at the beginning of the process. The key content of the Country Report is probably formed in the Autumn preceding the year the Country Report is published (in February). Putting effort into influencing CSRs is far too late. Education trade unions need to try and assert maximum influence as early as possible. As soon as one Country Report is published, it is time to start thinking about influencing the next one.
-  **Social dialogue: take the opportunities and make the opportunities** – the European Commission often provides opportunities to discuss key issues impacting education policy, and to which social partners are invited. This includes meetings to discuss the Education and Training Monitor. These are important opportunities to ensure that the voice of education trade unions is heard, but not all education trade unions attend when invited. Where such meetings do not take place, then unions should request them. This is best achieved through the European Semester Officer and building a relationship with this individual should be a key priority. Informal relationships are as important as formal opportunities.
-  **Allocate resources** – there can be no denying that engaging with the European Semester requires commitment. The European Semester is a responsibility that

needs allocating to an appropriate individual with sufficient seniority to represent the organization as necessary. Such a person needs time to build up expertise and resources to engage in networking etc. In some instances, this work may be helped by sharing responsibilities or resources across multiple unions in the same jurisdictions.



**Create alliances** – The European Semester is a political process and is subject to political pressure. Although appearing as a ‘technical process’ often carried out by civil servants (and therefore one that is not transparent and democratic) the Semester is open to political pressures in the same way as other political processes. Working with labour movement and civil society organisations makes it possible to amplify the arguments for public investment and quality education for all

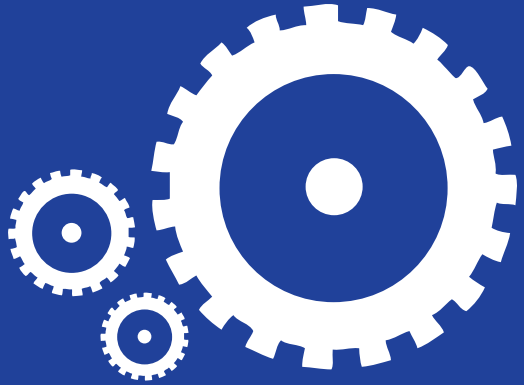


**Communicate internally** – The European Semester is a technical process that can seem obscure to education trade union officers and members alike. It is important that the wider union leadership are aware of Semester issues if they are to allocate sufficient resources to engaging with it. Educating members can be more challenging, especially when the processes and issues may seem so remote. However, ‘opening up the Semester’ must be located within a wider project of opening up the European Union to greater citizen involvement and making education trade union members aware of these wider issues should be seen as part of this process.



## List of abbreviations

<b>AGS</b>	Annual Growth Survey
<b>CSRs</b>	Country Specific Recommendations
<b>DGEAC</b>	European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture
<b>DGEMP</b>	European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
<b>DGECFIN</b>	European Commission Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ECB</b>	European Central Bank
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>ESO</b>	European Semester Officer
<b>ETM</b>	Education and Training Monitor
<b>ETUC</b>	European Trade Union Confederation
<b>ETUCE</b>	European Trade Union Committee for Education
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NRP</b>	National Reform Programmes
<b>SCP</b>	Stability and Convergence Programmes
<b>SGP</b>	Stability and Growth Pact
<b>TUSLO</b>	Trade Union Semester Liaison Officer



**EUROPEAN TRADE UNION COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION  
COMITE SYNDICAL EUROPEEN DE L'EDUCATION**

5, bd du Roi Albert II - 9<sup>ème</sup>  
B-1210 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel. +32-(0)2 224 06 91 / 92  
[secretariat@csee-etuice.org](mailto:secretariat@csee-etuice.org)  
[www.csee-etuice.org](http://www.csee-etuice.org)



**EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL**

5, bd du Roi Albert II  
1210 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel. +32-(0)2 224 06 11  
Fax +32-(0)2 224 06 06  
[headoffice@ei-ie.org](mailto:headoffice@ei-ie.org)  
[www.ei-ie.org](http://www.ei-ie.org)