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Teachers have an essential role in “Building a stronger Europe”

ETUCE reaction to the initiatives under the
European Commission’s *Communication on Building a stronger Europe:
the role of youth, education and culture policies*

Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 8-9 October, 2018

On 22 May 2018 the European Commission published its “chapeau” Communication entitled [*Communication on Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies*](#) with three Proposals to the Council:

1. [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems](#)
2. [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on improving the teaching and learning of languages](#)
3. [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Automatic Mutual Recognition of Diplomas and learning periods abroad](#)

Concerning the *Communication on Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies* we see it very essential that education became **high priority in the EU policy** in the Gothenburg Summit (Nov. 2017) and with the European Education Area 2025 chapeau initiative.

We fully support that the European Commission makes further steps to encourage EU Member States for the implementation of the European Pillar for Social Rights in particular its first principle, which defines that “Everyone has the **right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.**”¹

We welcome that the second package of initiatives under the *European Education Area 2025* focuses on motivating the EU Member States to improve **inclusiveness of education** and to further contribute to language learning and mobility of learners with targets that are essential to achieve high quality education for all.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

At the same time we regret the lack of involvement of the **education sector social partners** in defining these objectives and shaping the policy initiatives under the European Education Area chapeau communications. While ETUCE and its member organisations have been playing an important role in contributing to the policy implementation via the discussions and work under the ET2020 Working Groups, we strongly consider that these initiatives of the Commission have a great influence on the everyday work of the teachers and education sector staff and their contribution to defining policies would ensure better implementation on different levels, including via national social dialogue with the education trade unions until the school level.

The chapeau Communication introduces the initiative of the “**European Universities**” motivating universities to establish networks among others to create joint degrees and enhance mobility of learners. We would like to underline that these networks should be created while ensuring **inclusiveness and diversity** of the networks concerning the involved institutions and concerning the students. It is essential that any such network of universities is inclusive of all universities and students, regardless of status or socio-economic background. Creating elitist networks or universities militates against diversity and inclusiveness. We also would like assurance that the networks will not be used to harmonize and increase tuition fees from students. The offers of these networks should be equally available to all students, higher education teachers and researchers. We ask the European Commission to strictly monitor the inclusivity of these networks.

We are pleased with the proposal to introduce a **European Student Card**. This cost-reducing measure is positive as it will promote mobility among learners from disadvantaged backgrounds by relieving financial burdens, such as library fees, and transport and accommodation costs, associated with studying abroad. However, any such financial reduction would have to be considerable in order to **assist students in a meaningful way**.

We are equally pleased with the Commission’s initiatives to fight the **rise of populism, xenophobia and racism** in Europe by tackling the dissemination of misinformation. Such initiatives this year include the *Digital Education Action Plan, the Communication on Disinformation and the Communication on Artificial Intelligence*. Given the importance of this matter in the current political climate, it is regrettable that this communication did not discuss this issue or initiatives to combat it in more depth.

ETUCE reaction to the *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on*

High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems

We welcome that the aim of the proposal is to further encourage governments to improve access, quality and professionalization of early childhood education. Efforts indeed must be further taken even though the 95% attendance rate in ECE as an ET2020 benchmark has almost been met². However, there are **still gaps in ensuring access to children** from socio-economically disadvantaged people, in particular the minority groups, migrants, disabled children still do not have full access to ECE. Special attention should be paid to expanding ECE to 0-3 years old children. Equal access and high quality still has not been achieved concerning children living in rural areas and different regions of Europe.

It is positive that the recommendation points out that the early childhood education and care sector is laying solid foundations for learning at school and throughout life. Firstly, ECE should be seen as a child's right, Secondly, ECE needs to be seen from a **broader social context** in relation to work-life balance regulations, including maternity and parental leave, and from the perspective of how to better support young parents, in particular young women, to re-enter the labour market.

We believe that ECE must be defined so that early childhood and care is understood as referring to an arrangement that provides **education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age**. We remind that it is **the national curriculum** which defines the setting, funding, opening hours, programme content and the child's right to education and learning. Teachers with pedagogical knowledge are responsible for the child's early childhood education and care and their **professional autonomy** shall be protected.

It is essential that **quality and access to ECE should be implemented** in line with the *European Pillar for Social Rights*, *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, and the *European Commission's [Key Principals of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#)*.

Education trade unions' experience is that children do not have access to ECE facilities because of **high tuition fees and a lack of available ECE institutions**. This is a serious concern from the perspective of the young parents who cannot afford the ECE centres. At the same time, the Commission's proposal suggests that countries improve ECE by making it "affordable". We demand that **education remains a universal right**; therefore, it should be **accessible at no cost for all children** and it should focus on children's development and well-being as a basis for lifelong learning. ECE should not only be accessible to children whose parents are in a position to pay. Positive experience of education in the early years lays a good foundation for later years learning in primary school and beyond.

² In 2017 November the attendance rate was 94.8% according to Education and Training Monitor: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2017_en.pdf

We note that the proposal puts a lots of emphasis on modernising ECE to meet high demands from the education sector also ready in ECE, eg. **via new technologies and via digital tools**. We think that the ECE should be seen from the perspective of its value for the children and not from an economic viewpoint. **ECE is not only a preparation for school, but a beneficial education in its own right**. Several studies show that overly academic ECE has a negative impact on children and play should have more of a role in ECE. The curriculum should be structured around **play-based learning** and teachers with pedagogical experience in early years' learning should be employed in all early years' settings. We would like to highlight the importance of the right balance of the use of these digital and IT tools and protecting the well-being and free early childhood of the children.

Group sizes and *child:teacher ratios* are important conditions which have an impact on quality due to the nature of teacher-child interactions. ETUCE strongly believes that group sizes should be such as to enable the teacher to meet the individual needs of children, recognising that a sufficient number of qualified early childhood teachers is a prerequisite for acceptable quality.

When looking at recent OECD [Education at a Glance](#) (2018) figures³ on education spending as a percentage of public spending, many European countries have experienced a **decline** since 2007. Our member organisations are experiencing an increasing trend of budget cuts and privatisation of ECE institutions which does not support but hinders equal access to ECE. Although the economic recovery is considered back on track, there are still examples of austerity measures, with call to expand the provision of access to quality education in competition with demands to **restrain public investment**. Thus, we ask the governments to take immediate measures against **privatising** ECE and we demand **sustainable investment** in education, including in ECE.

Achieving **high quality education in ECE** is essential but what quality means in ECE and how to achieve and maintain it should be based on the discussions of the governments, ECE employers and trade unions in effective and meaningful **social dialogue**, with the involvement of other stakeholders, most importantly the **parents**. Also quality in ECE should be based on **research, experience, and knowledge from practice**.

We welcome that the proposal puts special emphasis on the support ECE staff should receive on **professionalisation**. **Initial education and continuous professional development of ECE staff** indeed define the quality of ECE. CPD for ECE teachers / educators should be available at **no cost to the teacher** and be of high quality while responding to the teachers' and students' needs, eg. how to ensure inclusiveness, teaching democratic values, and how to ensure high-quality play-based learning.

Inclusiveness and equal access to ECE should be seen also from the staff's perspective: while in general the teaching profession faces **major gender imbalance** as 7 out of 10 teachers are women in the OECD countries, women teachers constitute 97% of all teachers at the

³ OECD (2018), Public spending on education (indicator). doi: 10.1787/f99b45d0-en (Accessed on 19 March 2018)

pre-primary level education⁴. There are numerous consequences for the children if there is teacher gender inequality in ECE, therefore attracting male teachers to the profession is essential and urgent actions need to be taken at national level to reach gender equality among the staff.

The OECD shows that teachers' salaries are **low compared to other similarly educated full-time workers** and the range of pre-primary education teachers' salaries is the lowest among the teachers in the other education sectors, and reaching only **78%** of the salary of other similarly educated full-time workers.⁵

Therefore, we need to underline that only focusing on improving the initial qualification level and CPD of the staff is not enough to reach inclusive and high quality ECE. The **status, salary** and **working conditions** of the staff must be urgently improved. **Working time** of the ECE staff should allow them time to plan, evaluate, develop ECE, engage in discussions with parents and carry out administrative tasks outside of their teaching hours.

⁴ OECD: Education at a Glance, 2017 <http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm>

⁵ OECD: Education at a Glance, 2017 <http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm>

ETUCE reaction to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on

Comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages

We welcome that the proposal puts emphasis on language learning. Language learning makes an essential contribution preparing students to be **democratic citizens** living alongside **European values, mutual understanding, equality, and fundamental rights** besides for employability.

Therefore, we support that the proposal highlights the importance of **language variety** according to different language needs of schools and its availability in different education sectors.

We acknowledge that **little progress** has been made on teaching effectively two foreign languages since the European Council's recommendation in 2002 and the variety of taught languages is very narrow.⁶ In addition, the Education and Training Monitor reported that access to **language learning differs between education sectors**, for example only 34.5% of upper secondary VET students learned two or more languages in 2014, compared to almost half of the students in general education.

We demand to ensure that reforms on language learning should be designed and implemented with the involvement of the teacher trade unions at national levels in the framework of effective **social dialogue**.

Additional investment – from the EU and national budget - is essential to improve language learning. We would like to underline a great divide between the facilities and tools of language learning in the general public schools and private language learning institutions. It is of utmost importance to ensure that learning languages should be considered as a right to all citizens of Europe following the **European Pillar for Social Rights**, and make it of high quality and free for the public sector. In addition, **high quality updated materials** (books, memory cards, games, etc) and IT tools, software, etc can contribute to a great extent to improve language teaching, but sustainable financing of education is a must to ensure that the schools, students and teachers have full and free access to the IT tools and the software. We demand that **free and high quality language learning** of two foreign languages be included in the European Semester process.

We regret that the proposal focuses only on language learning in **compulsory education students**, while 70 million low-skilled adults need to improve their skills. Adults should have access to language learning throughout their lives. In many cases, adults will learn a language when motivated to do so for employment purposes or for the purposes of travel

⁶ More than 90% of students study English in at least one education level in most EU countries with 79.4% (in 2014) of children learning English during primary education

and mobility. We therefore urge the European Commission to propose support on how to **improve language competences of adults**.

Also, “enabling teachers to address the use of specific language in his or her respective subject area” is not a realistic suggestion as many teachers are obliged to teach in a language and according to **defined teaching materials and curricula**. We rather ask the Commission support **multilingual learning environment of the schools** while ensuring a right balance between foreign language learning and high level of literacy and communication development of the **mother tongue(s)**.

We support the Commission’s approach highlighting that language learning means also learning about countries in which the language is spoken, its culture, its traditions and history, its mentality and perceptions. In general, the proposal should protect the language diversity also from the viewpoint of respecting and appreciating the mother tongue of **refugees, immigrants and minorities**. The European Commission suggests the requirement of ‘proficient user level in at least one other European language’ which seems to exclude other languages spoken beyond Europe. This suggestion seems rather controversial considering the whole discourse on integration of migrants and ethnic minorities, multiculturalism and inclusion in the education, teaching tolerance and preventing xenophobia and extremism.

Language learning of **ancient languages** which are the basis of the common European culture can be considered as the first step to learn modern languages (Latin, ancient Greek) should be also protected and improved. The EU also needs to develop new policy in relation to teaching non-European languages. This could include languages of migrants and refugees as well as languages of emerging economies such as China.

Shortage of qualified language teachers is indeed a serious problem and we welcome that the proposal suggests more investment in initial and continuous professional development of language teachers. As part of their professional development, **language teachers** should be supported to attend courses and spend time in the country in which the language they teach is spoken. Funding should be made available so that such an experience would not create a financial burden on teachers.

However, shortage of language teachers must be seen in a broader perspective as there are **shortages of teachers in all subjects in Europe** due to an ageing teaching population and serious recruitment and retentions problems due to the low status of the teaching profession, low salary, gender inequality in the sector, and the need of more appropriate working conditions and supportive working environment.

Therefore, we do not agree with the suggestion of the European Commission’s proposal that countries should combat the language shortage by hiring foreign language speaking **professionals from other sectors**. We demand that all teachers should have teaching qualifications and those coming from other sectors to be upskilled to be teachers, and not to degrade the level of quality of teaching by increasing numbers of **unqualified teachers** to education.

Furthermore, mobility of teachers to improve their language skills is very important but we wonder how to reach the proposed target of **six months of learning or teaching experience** of language teachers or to-be-language teachers abroad. Concerning teaching experience abroad, we demand assurance that teachers will not be exploited as cheap employees of the host school and that their salary and working conditions are guaranteed, while both the learning and teaching experience should be recognised after returning to the home country.

We believe that learning languages is the most effective in the country of the target language. **Learning mobility** should be indeed be more available for all age groups of learners via Erasmus+ and the future Erasmus programme by broadening the financial support to cover the expenses of the mobile students.

ETUCE reaction to the Proposal for a *Council Recommendation on*

Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

We acknowledge that the European Commission considers it important to pay attention to recognition of learning periods and higher education and upper-secondary qualifications. Indeed, learning mobility should be enhanced by trust in study programmes and qualifications. It is, however, only possible with well-developed quality assurance systems.

We would like to emphasise that according to Article 165 of the Lisbon treaty of the European Union, “The Union **shall contribute** to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.” , thus **education is a national competence**.

ETUCE points out that an **automatic recognition would require a harmonization** of the structure and the content of upper secondary school systems and a unified quality control system. We are clearly against these attempts as according to the EU Treaty national education systems, including their structure, content and quality assurance systems are a **national responsibility**. ETUCE agrees, that knowledge, skills and competences must be recognized and acknowledged, but only to the extent that the student’s competence is likely to match the **competence requirements of each member state**. ETUCE suggests that the recommendation instead should call on member states to inform students and learners on the possibilities of getting their knowledge, skills and competences recognized and to establish administrative support systems to be easily used by the applicants.

We would put emphasis on better **trust and recognition of secondary and vocational education** when learners are entering to higher education. Permeability between vocational and higher education is still a challenge in Europe as academic and vocational education do not enjoy the same prestige. At the same time the proposal does not suggest any solution on the **divide between higher education and secondary level education** because it proposes different solutions to these sectors on recognising qualifications and study programmes. On the other hand **institutional autonomy** of high education institutions permits institutional diversity of recognising study programmes and qualifications while **institutional autonomy and academic freedom should be respected**. We would like to underline the importance to make a distinction between higher education diplomas and upper secondary education diplomas. Higher education diplomas are being

influenced by the **Lisbon Recognition Convention**⁷ and the **Bologna Process** wherein all countries agreed on the structure with BA, Master and PhD, that facilitates a system with mutual/automatic recognition and quality control debate has been taken in that sector.

In addition, we fail to understand how **existing non-EU-level tools** (Lisbon Recognition convention⁸) and EU-level tools applicable only to the higher education (Bologna Process, European Quality Assurance Registry, etc) and **tools applicable to vocational education and training** (European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training, ECVET and European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, EQAVET) could be **brought together to solve the problem of recognition, while national quality assurance plays a crucial role in trusting qualifications and programmes**. Despite this, we wish to underline that national quality assurance and qualifications norms must be respected. Memorandum of Understanding between the sending and host institutes developed under ECVET aims to ensure the recognition of studies in learning mobility of students in VET, and Erasmus+ also provides solution for this.

At the same time the **Directive of Recognition of Professional Qualifications (EC/55/2013)** should be better considered as it supports smother and in several cases automatic recognition of regulated professions. Common training framework under this Directive supports agreement among countries as a **bottom-up process** on common professional curricula and diplomas Education is a national question and ultimately, harmonisation of curricula, diplomas and education systems is not an EU-level matter. Competence must be recognised and acknowledged but only to the extent that the student's competence is likely to match the competence requirements of each member state.

⁷ https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/LRC_en.asp

⁸ https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/LRC_en.asp