

EFEE Statement on the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable education systems at times of crisis and beyond¹

Brussels, 30 June 2020

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted an unprecedented global crisis, which will continue to have major impacts on public health as well economic and social levels for the foreseeable future. While various countries have taken their own autonomous approach to tackling this emergency situation, the immediate response and willingness of the education sector to adapt to this new reality and collaborate to put the needs of the students as their first priority has taken a central focus across the continent. This reliance on a quick response from the education sector on all levels, has underpinned the specific nature of this sector in that it cannot be put on hold despite these unprecedented conditions. The education sector has unambiguously proven itself to be one of those services as it has been continuously provided in the last few months, albeit under different circumstances and with drastic organisational changes. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of education authorities, school leaders, teachers, trainers, academic staff and other education personnel to rapidly adapt to this unprecedented situation, the disruption caused by this sudden and unpredictable pandemic might have long-term impacts on European education systems at all levels.

Due to social distancing, many European states have been forced to close school facilities and other education institutions and to suspend face-to-face activities, forcing children and students of all ages out of the physical classroom as well as forcing teachers, academic staff and other education personnel to adapt to remote teaching, often without adequate skills or equipment available. While the pandemic has laid bare many of the inherent challenges that have plagued many European education systems during the last couple of years, it would be remiss not to mention the positive outcomes that have sprung from this global emergency. Within a relatively short period of time, the education sector has been able to realise a digital transition, whose possibilities and dangers have been heavily discussed for the past years. Using this momentum to the benefit of the entire education system, the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) believes that we should harness these

¹ In the context of this Statement, by “education personnel”, we refer to teachers, trainers, school leaders, academic staff and other education personnel. By “education sector” we refer to the whole education sector including early childhood education, primary, secondary education, higher education and research and vocational education and training.

experiences into creating a sustainable change for the entire education sector which will benefit every student as well as the teachers and other education personnel.

As we look forward to the next academic year in which social distancing measures will be eased across the EU and schools and other institutions aim to reopen, EFEE, representing 50 institutions responsible for management of education systems at all levels of education from 26 countries, would like to raise awareness on the following outstanding issues as well as shine a light on the many lessons and potential opportunities that can be gathered from this new reality. In doing so, EFEE aims to propose ways forward to manage future crises for resilient education systems in order to ensure that high quality education is provided and accessible to all European citizens during times of uncertainty and beyond.

Having this in mind, EFEE calls upon the European Commission to:

1. Give priority to an **extraordinary public investment plan** in high-quality education, training and research through the allocation of various financial instruments, including but not limited to the **European Social Fund and Erasmus+**, as well as the employment of large-scale fiscal stimulus measures to support tailor-made inclusive education where no student is left behind. With the pressure building on the human resources and other legal obligations of (private) education institutions, the financial sustainability of the entire education sector is under threat without a long-term investment plan that covers not only the recovery phase of this crisis but stretches out well beyond that. In this regard, it is imperative that education employers are provided with the adequate financial means that enable them to take appropriate and flexible measures responding to these uncertain times.
2. **Encourage Member States' investment in education**, not only with regards to facing this current emergency but more importantly with the perspective of creating a long-term resilient and sustainable education system. In particular, a greater investment is required to strengthen the availability of appropriate and qualitative equipment as well as secure and necessary infrastructure needed to perform remote-learning with the use of ICT tools, virtual classrooms, cloud solutions, etc. Regarding the latter, we emphasize that as remote-learning should and will be combined with face-to-face learning, significant investment will furthermore need to be made in building sustainable and flexible physical learning environments in schools that take into account the need for social distancing. Having this in mind, we call upon the Member

States to furthermore put their trust in school management and teachers to make adequate use of these resources in providing all education personnel with adequate tools, resources, equipment and training as they transition to remote learning.

3. Strengthen the **Child Guarantee as well as the Youth Guarantee** in order to ensure smooth transitions of pupils from one education level to the next and avoid the rise of early school leavers. Taking into consideration that the pandemic has mostly limited the educational opportunities of students from geographically excluded areas, vocational and education students and apprentices, students with special needs and students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, we urge the European Commission to safeguard their opportunities “for 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.”, as stated in the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights.
4. **Protect and reinforce social dialogue and collective bargaining** between education employers organisations and education trade unions as well as respect and promote the right of education social partners to be informed and consulted on all matters related to COVID-19 exit strategies and other outcomes that affect teachers, trainers, school leaders, academic staff and other education personnel’s rights and obligations, professional needs and working conditions.
5. **Support the introduction and facilitation of digital devices and tools** fostering teaching and learning on the basis of experiences gathered during COVID-19 crisis (remote distance learning, online evaluation platforms, innovative online teaching and learning methodologies). In order to create a true European Education Area, we urge national and EU-level agencies to collaborate on building a coherent framework of possible digital tools and programmes that education institutions can choose from. Additionally, it is paramount that all education personnel as well as the students are provided with adequate digital training in order to create supportive, inclusive and safe learning and teaching environments for students, teachers, trainers, school leaders, academic staff and other education personnel. Having this in mind, raising the technology awareness, both in terms of communication and lifelong learning, of students in adult education should receive additional support.

6. **Promote European research on the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector.** As the negotiations on the next HorizonEurope Programme and Erasmus+ Programme are ongoing, we invite the Commission to include specific funding calls for educational research on this specific topic in the programme. Furthermore, we invite the Commission to add a dedicated budget on self-regulated learning and remote-learning to the HorizonEurope Programme, which leaves room for pilots to try out new teaching methods. Finally, we support the call from the European Parliament for the Commission to adhere to its earlier commitment to double the Erasmus+ budget in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and review its current proposal which cuts the Erasmus+ budget by 7%. We underline that the Commission's ambitious objectives for a long-term recovery as well as a green and digital transition that emphasizes social inclusion will only be successful when the budget reflects these goals.
7. **Develop OSH strategies and recommendations** that prevent the spread of the virus while coming back to the physical classroom, taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic response measures as well as the specific and special education needs of vulnerable social groups, including migrants and refugees, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, etc. and provide them with targeted support. Moreover, these strategies should prevent the magnifying impact of the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on equality and inclusion in the education sector, further harming social mobility and widening inequality gaps, including gender equality. Lastly, these recommendations should consider the best course of action for the education sector should a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic occur.
8. Implement a holistic perspective on education that aims at **preparing active and responsible citizens** who are aware of their rights and preserve principles of democracy, solidarity, equality, and non-discrimination, especially during a crisis situation. Having this in mind, we deem it of paramount importance that teachers are furthermore trained and supported in helping children acquire the necessary skills and attitudes that will allow them to protect themselves and others from getting infected.



Erasmus+

With the support of the ERASMUS+ Programme of the EU