
Strengthening the capacity of education employers in the European Semester process - Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction and contextual introduction

In 2021, the European Semester is 10 years old. During the last decade the Semester has played a key role in terms of both economic governance and social policy coordination in the European Union. Given its concerns, in both the economic and social spheres, it is unsurprising that education policy is a key focus of the Semester. Many of the Semester's policy recommendations to individual Member States highlight different aspects of education provision, with all sectors, from early years to higher and adult, included. The Semester contains important policy recommendations, with considerable significance for education, and therefore, it is important for education employers to engage with the process. This significance has been enhanced with more recent efforts to rebalance the EU's economic and social agendas and the emergence of the European Pillar of Social Rights. These tendencies have arguably been reinforced by the experience of the Covid 19 pandemic, which places considerable emphasis on education as a key to promoting prosperity, inclusion and sustainability in the recovery.

How does the European Semester work?

The European Semester is an annual cycle of economic monitoring and surveillance, combined with a review of Member States' progress on a range of social goals (assessed within the European Semester through the European Pillar of Social Rights). The endpoint is a set of Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs), tailored to each individual Member State. The process begins with the 'Autumn package' and a raft of reports that provide a detailed assessment of current macroeconomic prospects across Europe. The Annual Sustainable Growth Survey (ASGS) can be considered as the key report in the Autumn package, as this defines the terrain on which subsequent elements of the process are framed.

Country Reports are typically published in February each year and provide a detailed analysis of each Member State, including in relation to progress relating to the previous year's CSRs. Country Reports include details about individual Member States' performance on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Individual countries are required to respond to the Country Report and to indicate how they will respond in policy terms to the issues it raises. The response is submitted to the European Commission as the National Reform Programme (NRP), which also provides the Member State's perspective on steps taken to implement the previous year's CSRs.

After a review of the NRP, the Commission publishes draft Country Specific Recommendations to each Member State. Following consultations, these are finalised by

the Council in July of each year. As the CSRs are published, work has already commenced on preparing for the next cycle.

The European Commission described the 2021 European Semester as ‘an exceptional cycle’ with significant variations introduced to reflect the changed circumstances due to Covid-19. The European Commission also announced it would restart its review of economic governance arrangements (suspended due to Covid-19), with a view to introducing new arrangements for the 2023 cycle. The first stage of the review (a consultation exercise open to citizens and organisations) will close at the end of December 2021.

At the launch of the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey in 2021 the European Commission indicated that the Semester process would return to its core focus in the 2022 cycle ‘while further adapting in line with the implementation requirements of the Recovery and Resilience Facility’ (RRF) (European Commission online, 2021).

A number of system adjustments have been put in place for 2022 as the Commission aligns both European Semester and RRF processes. The most significant change in 2022 is that Country Reports will be published in May 2022 as part of the Spring Package. This means that Country Reports and draft Country Specific Recommendations will be published simultaneously.

The European Semester: identifying the key actors

The European Semester process is managed by the European Commission’s Secretariat General. This Directorate allocates a European Semester Officer to each Member State (usually based in the country, but some ESOs cover more than one Member State). The ESO manages the Semester at a Member State level and the involvement of social partners is coordinated through this person. Much of the development of reports is undertaken by country teams comprising of several Commission Directorates, of which Economic and Finance take a lead role (reflecting the Semester’s core concerns). Key decisions, relating to Recommendations, are highly political and taken at appropriate levels in the Commission.

At a national level, the key actors are Ministry officials, with Finance Ministries (or equivalent) usually taking the lead role, but with other Ministries, such as Education, also involved. Individual countries have their own mechanisms for scrutinising Semester-related processes, with the National Reform Programme discussed in parliamentary committees, and sometimes more widely.

European Union Founding Treaties commit the EU to social dialogue and the Commission has committed itself to ‘restarting’ social dialogue, including within the European Semester. Employers’ organisations, as recognised social partners, can be expected to be included in the social dialogue relating to the European Semester at both the European and national levels. In reality, the nature of this dialogue can vary significantly between countries.

In addition to social partners, it is common practice to invite other civil society organisations to participate in relevant discussions.

Identifying the key points of intervention for employers

For education employers, as recognised social partners, there are a number of ‘entry points’ into the European Semester process. At a European level, discussions are typically conducted with European-level confederations, that is through the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE). However, as the process moves to the national level, two key opportunities for intervention open up. The first focuses on influencing European Commission thinking and focuses on the Country Report. ESOs organise a programme for fact-finding visits, when Commission officials visit the Member States in December each year (Covid permitting). Social partners are often invited to make submissions to this process. Given the central importance of the Country Report, this is an important opportunity to assert some influence. The second opportunity focuses on influencing Member State thinking during the drafting of the National Reform Programme. This is when the Member States often consult with social partners and others on their response to the Country Report. These are the key, formal, opportunities for participation. Later stages of the process (draft CSRs for example) include high-level discussions and are not open to influence from social partners that are not also Ministries.

Formal opportunities are obviously important to take advantage of, but informal relationships with relevant Commission and Ministry officials have also been identified as very valuable where it is possible to build these links.

Why should education employers intervene in the European Semester?

The Spring Package of the 2018-2019 Semester included in total 98 CSRs which were addressed to the 28 member states participating in the process. The number of recommendations for each state varied from 2 to 5, with most of them receiving 3 CSRs. From the 98 CSRs, 47 (47 out of 98, around 48%) included suggestions relevant to education policy and investment. Therefore, almost half of the published recommendations’ content was related to education and training issues. Moreover, all countries received at least one CSR that was directly related to education and/or training.

In the 2020 cycle, the total number of the published CSRs for the 28 countries involved in the European Semester Process reached 104. The number of recommendations for each state varied from 2 to 5, with most of them receiving 3 CSRs. Around one-third of these CSRs (35 out of 104, 33.65%) included recommendations directly linked to education and training. Only two of the countries (*LU, UK*) did not receive any education and/or training related CSRs. Compared to the 2019 CSRs, we can identify a decrease in the number of education-related CSRs in the 2019-2020 European Semester. However, this can be attributed to the effort of the Commission to focus on the healthcare and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore 2020 can be considered as untypical.

What is clear is that education features prominently throughout the process. It is also important to recognise that CSRs cannot be seen as the only ‘outcome’ of the European Semester, but that education content throughout Semester documents contributes to ‘agenda setting’, even if in less conspicuous ways.

Ensuring effective interventions in the European Semester: six steps to success

Seeking to influence a large and complex process such as the European Semester requires a strategic approach that incorporates several elements. Here we highlight six steps to ensuring successful interventions in the European Semester process:

1. **Develop a strategic plan, with long-term objectives:** influencing the Semester involves shaping the agenda. This can be a long term process that involves advancing the selected issue in a way that seeks to place it further up the policy agenda. If not successful initially, there needs to be a plan to build for the next cycle.
2. **Connect with EU agendas and find common ground:** align issues with EU priorities and 'go with the grain', rather than against.
3. **Link European and national level interventions:** amplify messages by ensuring that key issues are being raised at both the European and Member State level. Secure the necessary agreements and coordinate.
4. **Develop alliances and build relationships:** Securing change through complex, contested processes requires collaborative working with allies. Identify the potential for common ground and work with others where possible.
5. **Identify where to intervene and for what purpose:** There are key points in the process where you can intervene. Which point, will depend on whether the aim is to influence European Commission thinking, or national government thinking, or both. Informal channels are important and need to be cultivated, not neglected.
6. **Frame the narrative – provide the evidence:** The European Semester is both a political process and a technical-bureaucratic process and an effective intervention strategy must address both these elements. At a political level, it is important to locate interventions within a wider narrative that speaks to the key challenges that confront the Member States and the broader goals of the European Union. However, such a narrative also needs to be supported by an evidence-based approach to policy development in which the argument in principle needs to be accompanied by relevant data.