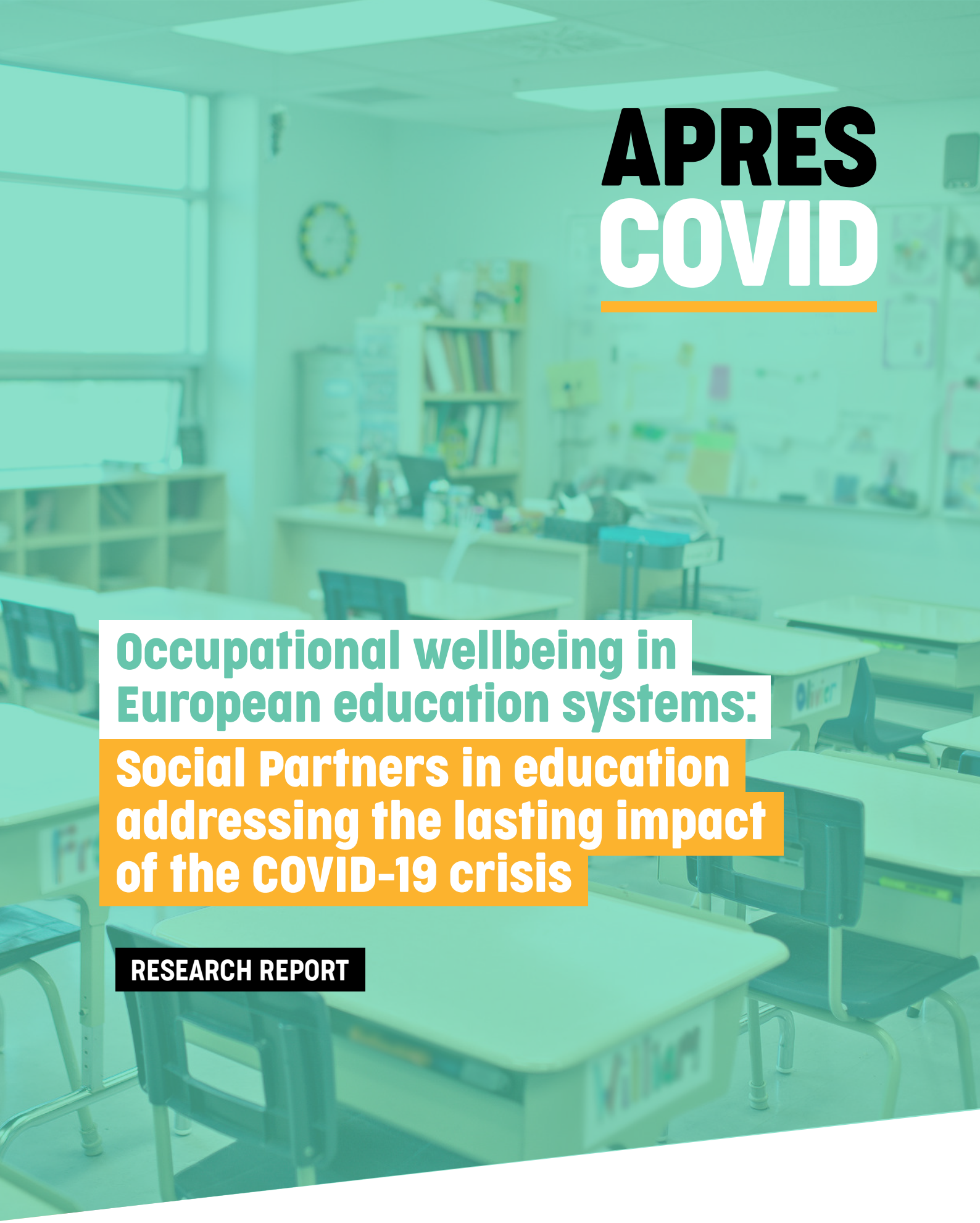

# APRES COVID

# Occupational wellbeing in European education systems: Social Partners in education addressing the lasting impact of the COVID-19 crisis

**RESEARCH REPORT**

CSEE ETUCE

VISIONARY ANALYTICS

EFEE

# Occupational wellbeing in European education systems:

# Social Partners in education addressing the lasting impact of the COVID-19 crisis

## RESEARCH REPORT

Visionary Analytics:

Aleksandra Morozovaitė
Fieke Margaretha van Dijk
Grėtė Veronika Gedutytė

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**ETUCE-CSEE**

Boulevard Bischoffsheim 15, B- 1000 Brussels
secretariat@csee-etuce.org

WWW.CSEE-ETUCE.ORG

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# 1. Introduction

This study was carried out to provide research and analytical support to the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and European Federation for Education Employers (EFEE) in implementing the project *APRES COVID: European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Addressing Psychosocial Risks for an Equitable and Sustainable Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis*, co-funded by the European Commission. The research study aims to expand the knowledge base of the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the education sector across Europe, with a specific focus on the rise and prevalence of psychosocial risks. This report examines the various work dimensions that contribute to the emergence, prevalence, and mitigation of such risks for education professionals in the workplace and beyond.

The research report relies on the following sources and methods of data collection:

- *Desk research and literature review* examined the trends in impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the education sector, including, its immediate impact, changes in working conditions, and long-lasting effects on psychosocial risks. The literature review was carried out using two complementary strategies: targeted search, focused on specific sources and databases likely to contain the most relevant publications and data; and reference search, searching upward and downward citations of each source. Findings are discussed in Chapter 2.
- *Online survey* targeting education trade unions and education employers across Europe aimed to gather insights on how representatives perceive the issues of psychosocial risks within the education sector following the COVID-19 crisis and approaches to managing and mitigating PSRs. Research findings are discussed in Chapter 3.
- *Case studies* provided an opportunity to engage with education personnel directly, allowing for a deeper understanding of psychosocial risks within the education sector and how these risks may have been amplified by the COVID-19 crisis. Three case studies were conducted in person in Slovenia, Portugal, and Malta and involved 18 interviews within a roundtable setting with teachers, school leaders, counsellors, and education support personnel (ESP), across primary, secondary, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education institutions (HEIs). Detailed case study reports were developed by ETUCE and EFEE and can be accessed here. The direct conversations were invaluable in deepening our understanding of the widely different and complex education professionals' experiences of the changes brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, shaping the direction of the research presented in this report.

**Report outline:**

The report is structured as follows:

- *Chapter 2* presents a literature review of the state of play of psychosocial risks in the education sector, including: an introduction of the European educational context, immediate impact of COVID-19 crisis on working conditions in the sector, and lasting impact of COVID-19 on working conditions and prevalence of psychosocial risks.
- *Chapter 3* presents the key findings from the analysis of the survey with education trade unions and education employers' representatives, highlighting their views on how the crisis influenced current working conditions and prevalence of psychosocial risks in the sector. Additionally, it provides an overview of European and national approaches to prevention and management of psychosocial risks.
- *Chapter 4* concludes the analysis of psychosocial risks in the education sector and the extent to which they have been influenced by the COVID-19 crisis.

# 2. State of play of psychosocial risks in the education sector across Europe

## 2.1. Workplace dimensions of psychosocial wellbeing

Psychosocial wellbeing is a fundamental component of occupational safety and health (OSH), constituting one of the key aspects of good working conditions. OSH comprises not only physical protection from injury and illness but also mental and emotional wellbeing in the workplace (ILO, 2022). In the context of education, psychosocial wellbeing of education professionals is important not just for their individual health and professional satisfaction but also for ensuring the overall effectiveness and resilience of the entire education system. Teachers, school leaders, counsellors, support staff, and other education personnel are integral to shaping the academic and personal development of children and young people, and their mental and psychological states influence the quality of education they provide (Gibson & Carroll, 2021). Consequently, maintaining and enhancing the psychosocial wellbeing in the education sector should be regarded as a strategic priority for policymakers and the broader educational community.

Legislation on OSH is largely focused on the employers' responsibility to protect workers across every aspect of work (ILO, 2022). The broader European legislative framework on Occupation Safety and Health at Work (Directive 89/391/EEC), also known as the OSH Framework Directive, sets out the fundamental obligations and principles for promoting OSH. It requires employers to systematically assess and manage workplace risks, provide appropriate information and

training, and engage with workers on OSH matters. Recognising the critical link between the wellbeing of educators and the healthy functioning of whole education systems (including students wellbeing and learning outcomes), the recent Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (2022/C 469/01) emphasises the importance of prioritising educators' wellbeing by promoting supporting working environments and adequate mental health support in order to mitigate stress and prevent burnout.

## Understanding workplace wellbeing

Wellbeing is a multifaceted construct that draws on various social, economic, psychological, cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions. Individually, it can be understood as a state of "good" psychological functioning in which basic psychological needs are consistently met (Ryff, 2014). Much of the research on wellbeing is derived from two general perspectives: the hedonistic approach, which conceptualises wellbeing as the absence of pain; and the eudaimonic approach, which conceptualises wellbeing as the presence of meaning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). What this means for an individual in the context of their workplace, however, can be rather complex. This complexity is evident in the education sector, a profession often driven by a vocation to work with children and young people – to educate and grow the future generations. As a result, intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in this line of work, sometimes persisting even in the face of ongoing challenges and adverse working conditions.

Undeniably, a profession in the education sector is meaningful work. Yet, many education systems across the EU are facing a declining teacher workforce resulting from numerous factors related to the reduced number of newly qualified educators, difficulties in retaining current personnel, and the effects of an aging population (Binder, 2024). Additionally, teaching responsibilities are becoming increasingly arduous at all levels of education. Educators are faced with growing demands, larger class sizes, heavier administrative burdens, more complex behavioural challenges, and rapid technological advancements and societal changes.

The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996) provides a useful lens for understanding the resulting challenges in the education system. The model posits that workplace stress emerges when there is a mismatch between the effort employees invest and the rewards they receive. At its core, it emphasises the social exchange process of work, where employees contribute labour and expect fair compensation, esteem, and job security in return. However, when high effort is met with inadequate rewards, this imbalance leads to emotional distress, increased health risks, and diminished workplace wellbeing. This phenomenon is readily observed in the education sector, which is by nature a high-effort profession. Although the work is often described as intrinsically rewarding, external rewards, particularly compensation and career advancement, do not always sufficiently offset the high level of effort required (Jonge et al., 2000).

Research on teacher's wellbeing by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides another valuable framework for understanding occupational health in the educational context, which encompasses four interrelated dimensions: cognitive, subjective, social, and physical-mental (Viac & Fraser, 2020):

- The *cognitive dimension* involves the mental processes necessary for sustaining attention, acquiring and applying knowledge, problem-solving, and decision-making. For educators, cognitive wellbeing translates into the set of skills and abilities necessary to work effectively, particularly in processing new information, concentrating on varied and complex tasks, and adapting to evolving pedagogical methods.
- The *subjective dimension*, often understood as the overall evaluation of one's life circumstances and affective reactions to those experiences, involves both positive and negative assessments of personal and professional life.
- Teaching is inherently a socially embedded profession. Thus, the *social dimension* is also a relational one, encompassing the daily interactions with children and young people, their parents and guardians, colleagues, school administrators and other education personnel. These interactions extend beyond the school community in which the institution operates.
- Finally, the *physical and mental dimension* is directly influenced by factors such as ergonomic conditions, workload management, and access to health resources.

The interplay of these four dimensions is powerfully shaped by the quality of the work environment, namely, job demands (e.g., workload, administrative tasks) and job resources (e.g., fair compensation, professional development opportunities, collaborative support, adequate facilities) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). When effectively balanced, they foster resilience and job satisfaction; if consistently neglected, they can contribute to the prevalence of psychosocial risks that can lead to various mental health issues such as stress, depression, and burnout, and a decline in overall quality of education (Gibson & Carroll, 2021).

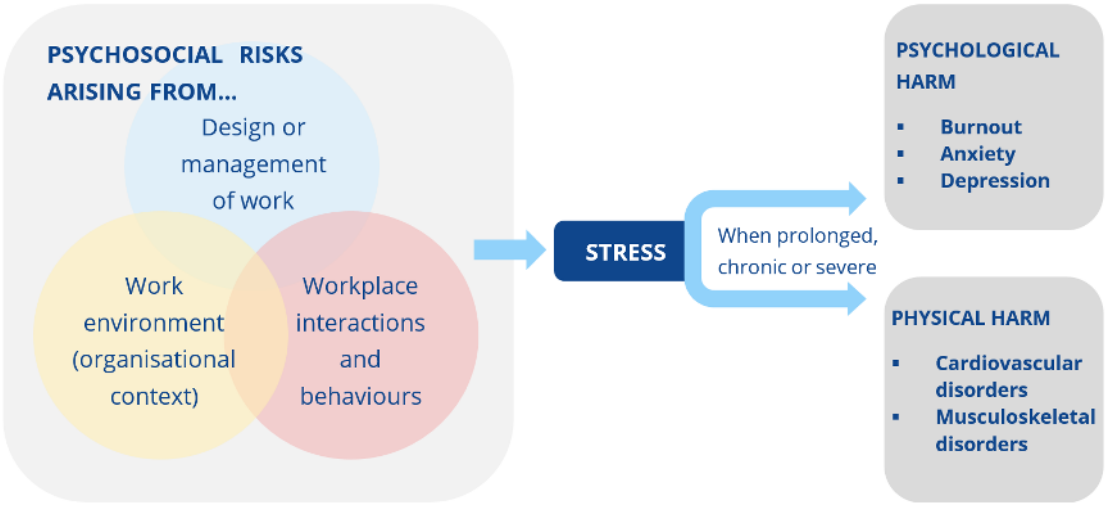
## What are psychosocial risks?

Psychosocial risks have been a topic of academic and policy discussion for five decades, the evolution of which reflects an increasing understanding of the various factors and levels shaping the psychosocial work environment (Boot et al., 2024). While early understanding of the workplace dimension of psychosocial risks was largely task-focused, related to issues like job strain, current knowledge encompasses a multitude of dimensions that aim to take into account various aspects of the overall job quality, such as job demands (including emotional demands and responsibility), influence and opportunities for professional development, social relationships and leadership, exposure to workplace violence, job security, working time and work-life balance (WHO, 2024; Boot et al., 2024). For this report, we adopt the definition of psychosocial risks provided by the European Agency for Safety and Health (EU-OSHA) (Eurofound, 2022):

*"Psychosocial risks are aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organisational contexts, that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm."*

Exposure to psychosocial risks can accumulate over time and lead to chronic work-related stress. Although certain levels of heightened pressure in the workplace are unavoidable and can even foster productivity, stress typically arises from a perceived lack of control and support, resulting in a negative psychological state that impacts both cognitive and emotional components (Cox et al., 2000). When prolonged or unaddressed, stress can turn into mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and burnout (van der Molen et al., 2020), or physical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, asthma, and diabetes (see *Figure 1*) (Navines et al., 2016). Occupational stress has also been linked to risk-behaviours that jeopardise own health, such as smoking and alcohol consumption (Kouvonen et al., 2005; Head et al., 2004; Keyes et al., 2012).

**Figure 1.** Psychosocial risks and outcomes pathway




Source: Visionary Analytics based on SafeWorks SA and EU-OSHA.

Numerous occupational stressors influence the prevalence of chronic stress-related disorders, including anxiety, depression and burnout.

- *Anxiety* is characterised by feelings of worry, fear, or unease that can be mild or severe. When persistent or overwhelming, it can significantly interfere with daily life and may manifest as physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, restlessness and difficulty concentrating (van der Molen et al., 2020). Anxiety disorders such as generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder, are clinical conditions that often require professional treatment. Some level of anxiety is not uncommon in the education sector. For example, many preservice teachers (PSTs) that are in training may feel anxious or afraid of being in charge of a classroom, managing student behaviour and being a good teacher (Theelen et al., 2022). However, heightened and chronic anxiety that persists over time can affect individual's daily activities and may require professional intervention. Additionally, anxiety and depression have high comorbidity and often can be precursors for each other.
- *Depression* is a mental health disorder characterised by persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in activities, and emotional or physical symptoms that interfere with daily life. It can negatively affect a person's thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and physical wellbeing and, in severe cases, can lead to suicidal ideation (Gibson & Carroll, 2021). Several risk factors that can be relevant to educators are "being a woman, being older", "or working 75% or less" than full-time hours (Johansson et al., 2022; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2023).
- *Burnout* is a complex phenomenon that has gained significant attention due to the rising demands, responsibilities, and social complexities of modern work environments. It is particularly prevalent in interpersonally oriented occupations such as healthcare and education (Agyapong et al., 2022; Kaschka et al., 2011; Steinhardt et al., 2011). Burnout is defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, which manifests in three primary dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalisation (detachment from oneself), and a diminished sense of personal and professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2007). Influenced by internal factors (e.g., perfectionism, ambition, excessive need for recognition) and external factors (e.g., high workloads, poor leadership, lack of autonomy, inadequate support), burnout progresses through various stages. It often begins with heightened commitment and effort before leading to emotional depletion, decreased motivation, cognitive impairments, and even severe psychological distress, including depression. If left unaddressed, burnout can undermine not only individual psychological, emotional and physical health, but also organisational efficiency and workplace morale.

The impact of compromised psychosocial and mental wellbeing of educators can extend beyond the individual and the educational institution. Some evidence suggests a link between the wellbeing of education personnel, namely teachers, and the wellbeing and learning outcomes of students. For example, students in classrooms led by teachers experiencing mental health challenges were found to perform worse on standardised tests (Vargas & Yepes, 2023). Moreover, teacher wellbeing has been positively linked to better student outcomes, including

enhanced emotional wellbeing and lower psychological difficulties through improved teacher-student relationships and teacher presenteeism (Harding et al., 2019). Such studies exemplify how fundamentally interconnected education systems are at multiple levels, with educators standing out as the focal point, both being affected by and, at the same time, shaping the learning environment and student outcomes.

Burnout, among other mental health problems, imposes huge economic costs on society. For example, estimates indicate that work-related mental health issues cost the EU approximately EUR 600B per year (OECD/EU, 2018). Such costs come from multiple sources; lost economic output due to reduced workforce participation, lowered productivity on the job, increased sick leave (absenteeism), impaired performance while at work (presenteeism), higher healthcare expenditures, and social welfare payments (disability, sick pay).

Therefore, recognising the workplace dimension of psychosocial wellbeing is critically important in recognising psychosocial risks prevalent in the education sector, assessing the enduring consequences of COVID-19 on the teaching profession and ultimately, understanding the multifaceted challenges facing education systems across Europe.

## 2.2. European context and work environment

European education systems are characterised by a rich diversity of structures, which reflect their unique historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic contexts. Broadly speaking, education in Europe encompasses several key stages: early childhood education and care (focused on social, cognitive, and emotional development), primary and lower secondary education (forming the foundation of secondary socialisation and academic learning), upper secondary education (offering diverse academic and non-academic pathways following school), vocational education and training, and higher education (European Commission, 2023). The multifaceted landscape is aimed at ensuring that education in Europe is both adaptable and inclusive, providing opportunities tailored to the needs of diverse learners and communities. Central to the success of these systems are education personnel – teachers, school leaders, academics, researchers, counsellors, administrators, support staff – all playing a critical role in adapting to evolving educational demands in an increasingly complex educational environment.

*Table 1* below provides a broad overview of the teaching profession across the different levels of education in Europe. The differential characteristics have varying impact on the work environment, working conditions, and consequently, occupational wellbeing of educators. The table below is an indicative guide in understanding the key differences between education levels and not meant as a comprehensive summary of these levels.

**Table 1.** Overview of the characteristics of the different levels of education

| Level of Education | Overview |
|---|---|
| Early Childhood Education and Care | • Early childhood education in Europe typically takes place in pre-schools, kindergartens, or daycare centres serving children from birth to the start of primary school. **ECEC settings often resemble a hybrid of education and care ("educare")** where staff must attend not only to learning activities but also to young children's basic care needs (feeding, hygiene, safety, emotional support).<br>• Necessary qualifications differ widely, but many countries now demand **tertiary education for pre-primary teachers** working with children aged ~3 to 6. In about half of European education systems, the minimum qualification for lead ECEC staff (core practitioners) is a **Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6)** for at least the older preschool age group (Eurydice, 2023).<br>• Young children require more individual attention, so **adult-to-child ratios are low by design**. Rather than "class size" (as in school), ECEC uses group size and staff-child ratio to ensure safety and quality. Regulations typically mandate a maximum number of children per trained adult. These limits vary by age: for infants under 3 years, ratios are often around 1 adult for 3–8 children, and for children 3 and over, about 1 adult for 8–15 children is common.<br>• Salaries in early childhood education are generally the **lowest of all education levels**, reflecting historically lower status and qualification expectations for this sector.<br>• In many OECD countries, **pre-primary teachers earn substantially less than the average tertiary-educated worker**, with extremes like Hungary and Slovakia where pre-primary salaries are under 60% of typical graduate earnings (OECD, 2022). |

| Level of Education | Overview |
|---|---|
| Primary Education | • Primary education in Europe generally covers the f**irst stage of compulsory schooling**. Primary school teachers typically teach most subjects to one class of pupils, promoting **a close-knit, nurturing environment**. Classrooms tend to be self-contained, with teachers spending many hours with the same group of children, creating **strong teacher-pupil bonds**.<br>• Primary teaching in Europe is a **female-dominated profession** (approximately 86% of primary teachers in Europe are women (Eurostat, 2022).<br>• Primary school teachers across Europe are **highly trained professionals**, usually required to have completed tertiary education focused on pedagogy for this age group. In virtually all European countries, a **bachelor's degree in education** (often a specialized primary or elementary education degree) is the minimum qualification to teach at primary level. There is a trend toward requiring a **Master's degree** or equivalent in some systems.<br>• The average number of pupils per primary school teacher in Europe is 13.3. This number ranges widely, from just 8 pupils per teacher in Greece to 18-19 in Romania (Eurostat, 2022).<br>• Primary school teacher **salaries** in Europe vary widely by country, but generally they fall in the **middle range** of the education sector – above early childhood educators, but in some cases slightly below secondary teacher salaries.<br>• According to OECD, **primary teachers' salaries are typically lower than those of secondary teachers with comparable experience** in many countries although the required qualifications are often the same (OECD, 2023). |

| Level of Education | Overview |
|---|---|
| Secondary Education | • Secondary education typically encompasses **early adolescence to late teens**. The environment is more subject-oriented and departmentalised compared to primary education. Students rotate to different classes and teachers for each subject, so teachers tend to specialise in one or two subject areas.<br>• Teachers balance **classroom teaching** with **grading and lesson planning**. They often coordinate their departments and contribute to the curriculum or extracurricular activities. The **work environment can be demanding**, as teachers navigate teenage behaviour, exam preparation pressures, and increasingly diverse classrooms.<br>• In Europe, the **standard requirement for secondary educators** (both lower and upper secondary) is a **tertiary degree in the subject(s) taught, plus a teaching qualification**. Common pathways include completing a Master's degree in a subject (e.g., mathematics, history, chemistry) followed or combined with a pedagogical qualification such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or a Master's in secondary education.<br>• Secondary **class sizes** are comparable or slightly larger than primary school classes, it is not uncommon for classes of 25-30 students in upper secondary in many countries.<br>• **Pupil-teacher ratios** (calculated by dividing total full-time equivalent pupils at each level of education by the full-time equivalent teachers at the same level) are similar or slightly lower than in primary because secondary teachers often have non-teaching periods for preparation. While there may be more pupils in individual classes, the formal calculation the calculation is across all school instructional time, which brings the average down. In 2022, the **EU average ratio** was 11.6 pupils per teacher in lower secondary and 11.2 in upper secondary, roughly comparable to primary levels (Eurostat, 2022).<br>• In many European countries, **secondary teachers earn slightly more on average than primary teachers**, reflecting higher qualification requirements or additional subject responsibilities. OECD data indicates that at the **upper secondary level**, teachers' salaries are closer to parity with other tertiary-educated workers (gap around 5% on average) whereas at primary the gap is larger (13%) (OECD, 2023). |

| Level of Education | Overview |
|---|---|
| VET | • Vocational Education and Training in Europe comprises the programs (usually at secondary or immediately post-secondary level) that prepare students for specific trades, crafts, or technical careers. Most students choose VET to either obtain **access to higher education** or to enter the **specialised labour market** (OECD, 2023).<br>• VET teachers and instructors are often called a "**dual profession**" because they need both pedagogical skills and real-world industry experience (OECD, 2022).<br>• **Tertiary degrees are common**, the most common minimum qualification is the ISCED Level 5, which is slightly lower than general education teachers (OECD, 2022). Many European VET systems allow individuals with strong industry backgrounds to enter teaching even if they lack a traditional teaching degree, provided they undergo some pedagogical preparation.<br>• Many fields related to VET education undergo **continuous (technological) advancements**, which makes it important for educators to update their skills (OECD, 2023).<br>• VET classrooms are often diverse in age, background, and motivation. Class size in vocational education is often inherently limited by the practical nature of training. In classroom-based theoretical lessons, VET class sizes can be similar to general secondary (20–30 students). But for practical exercises, lab sessions, or workshop training, groups are usually smaller. Generally, classroom sizes depend completely on **the programme and the popularity of the sector** (OECD, 2022).<br>• VET programmes tend to be **more expensive than general education programmes**, because they often require specific equipment and infrastructure to be taught successfully (OECD, 2023).<br>• Salaries for VET educators largely depend on whether they are employed in public education systems or by private companies. **Public-sector VET teachers** (those teaching in vocational secondary schools or public training centres) are usually paid on the same scale as other teachers of comparable level. |

| Level of Education | Overview |
|---|---|
| Higher Education | • Higher education in Europe comprises universities, colleges, polytechnics, and other tertiary institutions that award degrees or similar qualifications (ISCED levels 6–8, i.e., Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate).<br>• University academics (lecturers, professors, tutors) operate in an environment that combines **teaching, research, and administrative duties**. They often enjoy a higher degree of autonomy over their work. They instruct adult or young adult students, which means classroom management is less about discipline and more about **academic guidance**.<br>• Many EU countries have national **requirements on pedagogical qualifications** or a minimum of academic credits in pedagogy to qualify for (permanent) academic positions (European Commission, 2022; Universiteit Leiden, n.d.; University West, 2025). Generally, professors and lecturers at research universities almost invariably hold PhDs or equivalent doctorates (or in the process of obtaining one).<br>• Class size varies widely – a first-year lecture might have hundreds of students, while an advanced seminar or lab class might have just a dozen. This requires academics to **adapt from lecturing to large groups to mentoring individuals**<br>• **Well-funded universities** provide state-of-the-art facilities and research funding, whereas some institutions (often in regions with **lower public funding**) may struggle with outdated equipment or large **student-to-staff ratios** in popular fields.<br>• Higher education staff salaries vary enormously across Europe and by rank, and are generally higher (especially at senior levels) than those of schoolteachers, though entry-level academic posts may not be much higher. Despite this, higher education also has the highest rates of **precarious employment**, most prevalent in junior to mid-seniority positions with temporary contracts or casualised work. |

The education sector lays the foundation for societal development, fostering knowledge and skills, shaping values and attitudes, and to a certain extent, the behaviour of future generations. Knowledge is dynamic and teachers are expected to be lifelong learners. While certain knowledge and competencies taught in the classroom are relatively constant, like mathematics, biology, or physics, others change over time together with developments in technology and the changing society.

European cultural and social landscape is also very diverse, and so are students in the classroom. Education professionals create learning environments that recognise and nurture the unique abilities of each individual learner without excluding others (Caena & Redecker, 2019). As such, the demands placed on educators extend far beyond content delivery. In the classroom and school environment, they manage student behaviour, foster emotional intelligence, and equip young people with essential life skills. (OECD, n.d.; ETUCE, n.d.; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024). Entering the education sector is often driven by the vocation of the individual and in many countries, while it holds high social value, that value is not always reflected in the everyday experiences of educators (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021; McDonald et al., 2018).

When discussing the education sector, one often thinks of a teacher or an academic. However, the sector employs a range of professionals, each with specific roles and responsibilities that shape the experience of their work environment:

- **School leaders (headteachers, principals, directors)** are the administrators in charge of running primary and secondary schools. Their role straddles educational and managerial duties. School leaders set the educational tone of their institution, support and evaluate teachers, manage the school budget and resources, liaise with parents and the community, and ensure compliance with educational policies. In many European countries, school heads also handle hiring of staff and have a say in curriculum implementation (within national/regional guidelines).
- **Counsellors and support staff** address students' welfare, special needs, and the smooth operation of school services. These roles include guidance counsellors, school psychologists, special education needs (SEN) assistants, teaching assistants (aides), and other support personnel. Their primary job is to support students' personal, social, and academic development. In secondary education, counsellors often guide students on course choices and career or higher education paths (career guidance) and provide a point of contact for personal or mental health issues. In some European countries, every secondary school has at least one counsellor or psychologist on staff; in others, especially where resources are limited, a counsellor might serve multiple schools, or such services are provided by external centres.

- **Educational administrators** are the staff who handle the organisational, bureaucratic, and policy aspects of education institutions.

    - In schools, administrative staff are responsible for enrolment, record-keeping, communication with parents, scheduling, and budgeting. A school secretary or office manager, for instance, is crucial for managing daily operations – processing attendance, maintaining student databases, coordinating meetings, and supporting the principal.
    - At higher administrative levels, in many European countries, local or regional education authorities employ administrators who oversee multiple schools (inspecting quality, implementing policies, distributing funding).

- The higher the education level of the institution, administrative tasks and activities include tasks like basic secretarial work and maintenance tasks, but also highly skilled tasks, such as internationalisation, business liaison[1], and research support. Higher education institutions tend to be much more business-oriented than primary and secondary schools due to a difference in government support and institutional goals, this necessitates a different balance between research or teaching staff and professional support staff (Ryttberg & Geschwind, Organising professional support staff at higher education institutions: a multidimensional, continuous balancing act, 2021).

Education in Europe is delivered through a mix of public schools, private schools, and state-subsidised private schools, which can affect resources and work environments of educators. Public schools are financed and run by governments (national, regional, or local), whereas private schools are generally managed by non-state entities (e.g. religious organisations, foundations, or for-profit companies) and often funded by student fees or private sponsors (though some receive state subsidies). State-subsidised private schools are privately run and can be religiously affiliated. They may follow an alternative pedagogical approach, but in most countries, they do have to adhere to national curricula and regulations to receive the public funding (Boeskens, 2016).

The majority of European students attend either public schools or state-subsidised private schools. As of 2022, approximately 87% of primary pupils, about 86% of lower-secondary pupils, and 81.5% of upper secondary students in the EU were enrolled in public education (OECD, 2022). However, the share of private education varies by country. For instance, Belgium stands out with a majority of students in state-subsidised private schools (e.g. Catholic schools) – only about 46% of Belgian lower secondary students are in public schools, meaning most are in publicly-subsidised private networks. Other countries with notable private enrolment include Malta, Spain, and France (often due to sizeable religious or independent school sectors). In contrast, according to OECD Education at a Glance data of 2021, some Nordic and Eastern European countries have over 90% of students in public schools (i.e., Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia across all levels of education and Denmark at the upper secondary level) In, Sweden and Finland approximately 80% of students were enrolled in public schools in 2021 (OECD, 2024).

Educators in public schools are often public sector employees with union representation, standardised pay scales, and job protections. This can mean greater job security but also sometimes more bureaucracy and less flexibility – public school teachers must follow the national curriculum, adhere to government-set standards, and undergo public inspections. Private school teachers may not have the same civil-servant status; their salaries and benefits are determined by the school or owning organisation (which might pay more to attract talent, or in some cases pay less if demand for positions is high). Private institutions tend to have more freedom to innovate or set their own curriculum and policies since they operate outside direct government management.

Diversity within European classrooms is steadily increasing, encompassing a broad range of learner characteristics, including variations in age, gender, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and differing abilities or special educational needs (SEN). Historically, "inclusive education" discussions centred predominantly on physical or cognitive disabilities (e.g., autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)), leading to the belief that only specialised teachers can effectively support SEN pupils (Beaton et al., 2021). Consequently, teacher training programs often treat inclusive education as an optional rather than foundational component. However, the current trend of integrating students with SEN into mainstream settings necessitates that all educators develop inclusive teaching competencies. Education systems in Europe have responded by employing learning and support assistants (LSAs), but in some cases, assistants may lack formal training resulting in differential ability to positively influence pupils' development (Webster, 2021). Furthermore, well-qualified LSAs often receive inadequate compensation and limited opportunities to fully participate in the school community. As a result, the supervision of less qualified LSAs, coupled with increased personal responsibilities associated with SEN students, can heighten stress for classroom teachers. Still, evidence suggests that targeted professional development focused on learning differences and effective strategies for SEN pupils can significantly enhance teacher efficacy in inclusive education (Gray et al., 2017).

## Training

Most education staff are required to follow pedagogical and subject-related education in order to work in education. The aim of initial teacher training (ITE) is "to provide prospective teachers with core professional competences and to develop the attitudes needed for their future role and responsibilities" (European Commission, 2021). Exceptions for this are found among administrative staff, education support personnel and staff at early childhood education, and support staff such as counsellors, depending on the country. Professional training of preschool teachers is the most ambiguous in the European education sector, as its professionalisation and qualification requirements have not yet been fully developed in all European countries (Melnyk et al., 2021). For most other categories of education staff, participation in ITE or supplementary pedagogical training is obligatory, with the duration and complexity of such training determined by individual education institutions (European Commission et al., 2021).

Following the completion of ITE, many European education systems incorporate induction periods for new teachers, which may be either obligatory or voluntary. These induction periods commonly involve mentoring and professional development activities, which have been proven highly beneficial for newly recruited staff. However, the practice of reducing teaching workloads during induction periods is still relatively uncommon. Beyond the initial induction period, educators are actively encouraged to engage in continuing professional development (CPD), encompassing a wide range of activities such as online or face-to-face seminars, professional reading, educational conferences, coaching, observation visits to other educational institutions, and formal qualification programmes. Lifelong learning is thus regarded as an essential component of the educational profession, a perspective underscored by the notably high participation rates in CPD. According to the TALIS 2018 survey, approximately 92.5% of lower secondary teachers within EU Member States participated in at least one form of CPD during the preceding year. Even the Member State reporting the lowest participation rate, France (82.6%), still exhibited relatively high participation (European Commission et al., 2021).

During and after the COVID-19 crisis, it was determined that all European teachers should be trained in various training models that include face-to-face, hybrid, and online teaching, to lower future stress at crisis time. Similar to ITE, CPD of teachers is regulated differently across countries. In most European countries, CPD is seen as professional duty, while in some it is optional (e.g. Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands) (European Commission et al., 2021).

## Working conditions

The working conditions in the educational sector are distinct from other professions. Specific risk factors within the work environment tend to centre around high workload, supplemental administrative work, large class sizes, conflicts with students, or parents, limited resources, low wages, and time pressures (Garcia-Carmona et al., 2019). Conditions vary across educational levels affecting educators in ECEC schools, primary and secondary schools, vocational institutions and universities in different ways. Teachers of students between the ages of three and 15 are more likely to encounter challenges related to discipline and motivation, in addition to challenges related to the over or under involvement of pupils' parents or guardians (Redin & Erro-Garces, 2020). By contrast, academics in higher education institutions typically have more flexible relationships with students and bear fewer obligations regarding their academic outcomes.

Teachers' salaries can range quite widely within countries, as different qualification levels tend to be associated with different salary scales. Typically, the salaries of teachers increase with the level of education they teach. For example, at lower secondary level, a teacher at the top of the pay scale with the highest qualifications typically earns 78% more than a newly qualified teacher on the minimum pay scale (OECD, 2024). However, according to OECD research, among more than half of the OECD and other participant countries in the Education at a Glance report of 2024, the salary scales barely diverge between pre-primary to upper secondary school teachers. Higher qualifications in parts of the education sector do not

necessarily equal higher compensation in countries like The Netherlands, Scotland, Lithuania, and Bulgaria (OECD, 2024). Worryingly, some teachers even indicate that if they would not have an alternative source of household income, e.g. a partner's salary, their vocation to teaching would not be enough for them to stay in the education sector. Instead, they would move to other sectors with a better balance between workload and compensation (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2024; McDonald et al., 2018).

Teacher shortages are an ongoing challenge for the sector. In Europe, 24 out of the 27 EU Member States have reported significant deficits in teaching personnel (Pereira, 2024). Teacher shortages disproportionately affect science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, high-school language instruction, and early childhood education, resulting in larger class sizes, heavier workloads, and diminished investment in schools. For instance, 45% of Austrian school administrators confirm that a lack of qualified teachers hampers their institutions, while Sweden anticipates a deficit of approximately 10,600 teachers and preschool educators by 2038 (Institute of Computational Perception, 2024; Skolverket, 2025). A major driver of staff shortages is an ageing workforce. Eurostat statistics show that 39% of schoolteachers in the EU are over 50 years old, whereas only 8% are under 30 (Eurostat, 2023). Compounding the problem is the eroding appeal of the teaching profession, largely attributable to low compensation, long work hours and excessive workloads, which deter prospective teachers and reportedly push some early-career educators out of the field within their first five years (Quest, n.d.; OECD, 2024).

## 2.3. Immediate impact of COVID-19 on the teaching profession

The COVID-19 crisis impacted the sector heavily as schools and universities initially closed, while students required continued education. Teaching professionals had to adapt almost immediately to new technologies, teaching online in their own homes and subsequently returning to school while carrying the responsibility of complying with COVID-19 regulations and supporting student mental health. Their own personal and professional lives were also overthrown (Ermenc et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 crisis, working conditions in the education sector drastically changed. In most European countries, classrooms moved into the homes of both students and teachers, and everyone involved became dependent on digital resources such as internet access, smartphones, laptops or computers, and available workspaces. The following challenges for education professionals were prevalent throughout the transition during the early crisis period:

- Face-to-face teaching was no longer possible, and online teaching became the norm.
- Pedagogical models had to be adapted to online and hybrid teaching.
- The work environment intertwined with the home environment and teachers and students had to share their work/learning space with family members and/or other roommates.
- Socio-economic background of students was exposed.
- Student mental health and motivation declined, which had a direct impact on some educators.

## Accelerated digitalisation

The impact of school and university closures during lockdown was widespread. Teaching and educational activities at all levels of education were moved online and within a short timeframe, solutions and preparations were found for adapting teaching methods. At the same time, teachers had to familiarise themselves with digital technologies and new pedagogical practices (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023). A Eurydice report noted that the shift to online or blended learning exposed large differences in the levels of digitalisation between countries, as well as in the digital capacities of schools, teachers, and learners (Eurydice, 2022). The majority teachers in Europe had never taught online before COVID-19. In a 2020 survey, 66.9% said the first lockdown was their first experience with online teaching, 24.9% had some prior experience, and only 6% had extensive online teaching experience (European Commission, 2020).

The impact of the move to online teaching tended to vary across educational levels. Universities in Europe were generally better equipped educational institutions to move to an online learning environment and incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous online teaching. Online teaching practices have existed at higher education level to some capacity for a long time. The more advanced and well-financed technological infrastructure at many European universities demonstrated ongoing digitalisation prior to school lockdowns in 2020. While these developments were relatively slow and focused on improving accessibility and extra engagement from students, many HEI were better equipped before 2020 than other, less well-resourced institutions (Kaqinari et al., 2021; Ranne & Psychogyiou, 2022).

Distance learning necessitated a greater level of self-sufficiency, motivation and accountability among students compared to traditional classroom settings. While this level of independence was anticipated at higher levels of education, educators at lower secondary and primary schools were challenged (Kruszewska et al., 2020; Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021). Young learners, who were still developing critical executive functions like planning, self-regulation, task initiation, and other related emotional and cognitive functions, were at a greater disadvantage during the period of online learning. Some students required more assistance, support, and attention from their teachers, and therefore more of their time, especially as parents or guardians were not always available to oversee the learning process (Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021).

## Online and hybrid teaching

The shift from in-person to online learning disproportionately affected children from lower-income families and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Blasko et al., 2022; Kraft & Simon, 2020). The increased visibility of existing inequalities necessitated for educators, school leaders, and administrators to become involved to mitigate digital resource shortages and ensure that all students received adequate instruction, regardless of socio-economic status (Bol, 2020).

A study on Polish primary school teachers found that at the outset of the lockdown, teachers had to rely on personal resources, such as their own computer equipment, IT skills, and self-developed digital materials (Kruszewska et al., 2020). This is one example of many, and it highlights a widespread issue in certain European countries: teachers' efforts to implement remote education depended heavily on the personal resources of students, which in turn further brought to light socio-economic disparities among pupils. Research indicates that many children in Italy, Bulgaria, France, Croatia, Germany, Cyprus, and Czechia lacked essential resources for online learning (Blasko et al., 2022). In some instances, however, the insights into students' home environments during lockdown may have helped educators better understand pupils with behavioural problems, since such issues are frequently tied to challenging home conditions and are less visible in the classroom.

During the period of distance learning, the need for support for all educational staff – be it digital or pedagogical – was high. Educators who received adequate support from school officials and colleagues reported greater professional satisfaction, and family or principal support was associated with higher life satisfaction (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021). Post-COVID literature reinforces these findings, showing that institutional support (in the form of asynchronous or synchronous training, technical assistance, and peer collaboration) contributed to more positive views of online learning. In particular, collegial support boosted optimism about online teaching, improving job satisfaction and overall wellbeing. Conversely, a lack of support fostered negative attitudes, linked to the perceived increase in preparation time and workload (Zhou et al., 2024; Stang-Rabrig et al., 2022; Gabbiadini et al., 2023; Ermenc et al., 2021).

The reopening of schools increased the risk of community-wide virus infection, thus introducing hybrid teaching solutions into the classroom. In practice, this meant that the classroom connected both on-site students and remote students during synchronous lessons (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021; Raes, 2022). While hybrid teaching facilitated more flexibility and inclusion in the classroom, a number of pedagogical and technological challenges came alongside it (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). The main pedagogical challenge was the differential experience of the same lesson by in-class students and remote students. Remote students reported feeling distance between them and the physical classroom, and feeling excluded, for example, during technical difficulties that could not be immediately solved. Frustration also increased when remote student interactions, such as raised hands or chat messages, went unnoticed by instructors (Raes, 2022). Conversations with educators during current project's case study visits highlighted that many teachers perceived hybrid classes as one of the more demanding aspects of COVID-19-era teaching. The need to switch between pedagogical methods, master

new digital tools, address technical issues, and accommodate disruptions required skill, time, motivation, and institutional support.

Another direct consequence of the COVID-19 crisis that became more apparent upon the return to the classroom was the significant learning loss among some students and differential levels of ability, reflected by students' academic achievements and their behaviour in school. Social problems manifested as increased individualisation, socialisation problems, and compulsive use of technology. Some children were unable to concentrate and sit still for prolonged periods of time (Gulmez & Ordu, 2022). The cognitive gap between some students had been an expected outcome of the online learning period, because of its inherent dependence on student motivation and parent involvement. Educators were now also faced with significant social and psychological challenges in their classrooms on top of challenging hygienic and social distancing measures. Not only did the return to face-to-face and hybrid education heighten the workload and work pressure of education professionals, but occupational exposure also increased the risk of getting sick themselves, which was a significant stress factor among some and especially older employees (Hutchison et al., 2022; Klussman et al., 2023).

Notably, in the EU, women constitute 72% of teachers in primary and secondary schools (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021). Many women also assume most of the caregiving responsibilities in their families, regardless of whether they live in dual-earner households. This situation resulted in more frequent work–family conflicts for women during the COVID-19 crisis, despite having professional roles equivalent to those of their male counterparts (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021; Klussman et al., 2023). Research on how crises affect gender roles indicates that, whether it is war, natural disaster, or pandemic, women become more vulnerable in society and often bear additional responsibilities. Considering that the majority of teachers in primary and secondary schools are women, the burdens experienced during a crisis in combination with the high workload and pressure on teachers, placed female teachers at a significantly higher risk of burnout and other mental health challenges than their male colleagues (Dogra & Kaushal, 2022; Klussman et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2018).

## Technostress

This rapid development and change of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has made it necessary for educators to continuously improve their knowledge and competencies in order to better integrate new ICTs into their teaching processes. The increased reliance on technology and telework during the COVID-19 crisis led to technostress among some educators. Technostress refers to the stress caused by ICT use, and researchers identify several drivers in the educational context. One of the drivers is techno-overload – technology increasing the volume and pace of tasks to the point that the educators feel they must work faster and longer (Cazan et al., 2024). Another is techno-invasion – the sense of being permanently connected and available due to digital tools. During COVID lockdowns, many education professionals experienced both. They had to convert curricula into digital formats, learn new apps, field a constant stream of parent and student messages, and even remain online after working hours. In an EU-wide survey, approximately 43% of teachers reported

"increased workload and stress working from home" as a major challenge during the switch to online learning (European Commission: European School Education Platforms, 2020).

Lack of sufficient digital skills was another strain. In the same survey, about one in four European teachers cited their own digital competence as a challenge during the transition (European Commission: European School Education Platforms, 2020). Especially for older or less tech-savvy teachers, mastering e-learning platforms and troubleshooting ICT issues became a steep learning curve. In Norway, for example, even though digital infrastructure is strong, some teachers felt overwhelmed by new duties: a Norwegian union survey in late 2020 found over 50% of teachers had considered leaving their job, citing being overworked and exhausted by "corona-school" demands (Ertesvåg, 2021). Educators also reported feeling a constant pressure to be available online for students and parents, an example of techno-invasion stress. A study in the UK had similarly reported university lecturers feeling an expectation of permanent availability, along with no relaxation of deadlines, which "drastically intensified" work-related stress (Mordi et al., 2025).

## 2.4. The lasting impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic's consequences affected every aspect of education, impacting institutions and individuals alike. Considering the multifaceted impact of the pandemic, it cannot be considered only a health emergency, but also a social and economic crisis, having triggered long-lasting changes in the labour markets, industrial relations, and society at large. Although several years have passed since the crisis subsided and much of society has returned to business as usual, some areas of the education sector still show residual impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. This chapter examines the extent of the enduring impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector, both positive and negative, with a focus on the workplace wellbeing factors that influence the prevalence of psychosocial risks in the teaching profession.

### 2.4.1. Interplay between working conditions and psychosocial wellbeing

Working conditions – the physical, psychological, and organisational aspects of the work environment – were significantly altered during and shortly after the COVID-19 crisis, as demonstrated in Chapter 1.3. While not all changes to working conditions in the education sector can be attributed solely to COVID-19, the crisis acted as a catalyst, accelerating change in how educators manage their time, maintain work-life balance, and adopt digital technologies. For this section, working conditions are categorised as follows: (1) design or management of work, (2) work environment (organisational context), and (3) workplace interactions and behaviours (social context). The trends discussed in this section were not entirely new, rather, they were ongoing processes that the crisis had magnified or hastened.

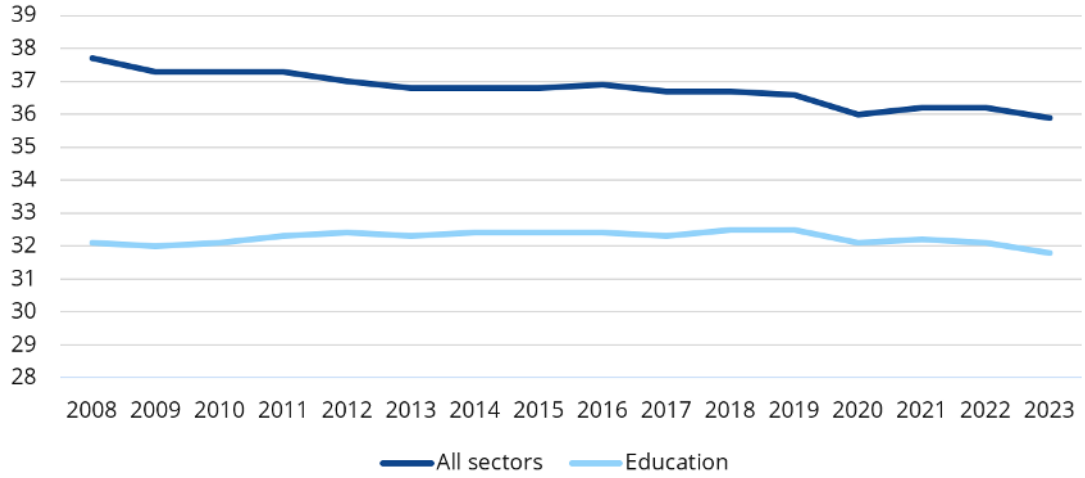
#### 2.4.1.1. Design and management of work

Psychosocial risks can emerge from the way in which work tasks and responsibilities are organised, structured, and overseen. Four key dimensions often tied to occupational safety and health as risk factors for PSRs at work include job demands, low job control, poor support, and poor role clarity or role conflict, which are discussed in turn.

##### Job demands and workload

The combination of high workloads and time pressure is frequently identified as a major factor associated with work-related stress in the education sector prior to and post-crisis (Kreuzfel et al., 2022; Angrave & Charlwood, 2015). Given the breadth of educators' responsibilities, ranging from lesson preparation and grading to administrative tasks and professional development, workload is best understood as the total number of hours required to fulfil these diverse duties. Although official working hours in the education sector are significantly lower on average than the EU average across all sectors (see Figure 1 below), it is comparatively difficult to determine the actual working hours of educators.

**Figure 2.** Average official weekly working hours (2008-2023)




Source: Visionary Analytics based on Eurostat [lfsa_ewhan2].

Many education personnel, particularly teaching staff and school leaders, report actual working time that exceeds both legally defined working hours and those observed in other sectors. For example, in the UK, teachers work on average an additional 17.4 hours beyond their contracted 35-hour workweek, amounting to approximately 660 unpaid extra hours per year (NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, 2025). Similarly, in Portugal, teaching professionals reportedly average more than 50 hours per week – 15 hours above the legally stipulated limit (TPN/Lusa, 2024). A study in Germany, which aimed to examine the link between long working hours and mental health risk factors in the teaching profession, found that more than a third of teachers at German upper-level secondary schools exceed the statutory maximum work limit of 48 hours per week while 15% of teachers document weekly working hours above the 55 hours limit (Kreuzfeld et al., 2022). Moreover, one-third of school principals in Austria had worked non-compensated overtime, reportedly between 100 to 400 additional hours of overtime per year (Institute of Computational Perception, 2024).

Workplace culture contributes to intangible pressures to extend working time in the education sector. This trend is particularly pronounced at the level of higher education. Within academia, beyond teaching activities, there is a strong emphasis on producing scholarly publications. While academic competition has traditionally been acknowledged as a "necessary" element of research, a confluence of governmental, funding, and institutional incentives has, in many instances, escalated that competition to a problematic degree (Riva et al., 2023).

Education professionals across all levels of education, from primary to higher education, report high workloads resulting from an imbalance between limited working time and a growing number of tasks (Conte et al., 2024). This includes a considerable amount of bureaucratic work, such as completing forms for principals, school communities, or the Ministry of Education, grant applications, and various other duties that extend beyond typical teaching.

Globally, there is a growing consensus that teachers' work has expanded in both scope and intensity over recent decades (Creagh et al., 2023). In response, many education systems have introduced targeted measures, such as reducing the number of teaching hours or providing ready-made lesson plans. However, these measures may oversimplify the challenges because they do not adequately distinguish between the concepts of "workload" and "work intensification" (Creagh et al., 2023). In addition to the sheer volume of work in combination with limited time to perform it, education systems and modern classrooms have grown in complexity – a change that reflects the broader social, cultural, and ethnic diversity as well as a wider range of student needs. Since the COVID-19 crisis, these challenges have further intensified, partly due to the almost ubiquitous use of social media among school-aged children, often at a very young age, and the heightened concerns about students' mental health.

While the extent to which COVID-19 has resulted in prolonged working hours for education professionals remains difficult to ascertain due to limited direct evidence and systemic issues that existed long before the health crisis of 2020, it is becoming increasingly evident that not all educational staff at various levels of education find it easy to establish and maintain boundaries that separate their work from personal time. This challenge stems from both internalised standards for high-quality instruction and external pressures from pupils, parents, and the broader public (Kreuzfeld et al., 2022). Consequently, a sizable portion of educators continue to work into evenings and weekends, eroding opportunities for rest and psychological detachment, an essential element of recovery. Prolonged "physiological activation" that extends beyond the working day inhibits sufficient recuperation, posing an especially severe risk to early-career teachers who may leave the profession if they become deep-seated in an unsustainably demanding work culture.

Recognising the persistent challenges and work pressures educators increasingly face, there have been moves at the EU and national levels to address work-life balance for educators. The European Parliament in 2021 passed a resolution urging the European Commission to propose a directive on the right to disconnect for all workers, citing the surge in telework and an "always-on" culture exacerbated by COVID-19 (Trindade, 2021). Recently, education unions and employers have highlighted this issue in the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE), calling for stronger EU action and measure to curb psychosocial risks, noting that improving teachers' working conditions (including work-life balance) is essential to retaining educators (ETUCE, 2025). As a result, many EU countries are looking at policies or agreements to restore boundaries. Notably, Belgium has adopted national legislation guaranteeing the right to disconnect, and the education sector in Flanders has adapted this to fit school realities – putting clear boundaries in place to avoid teachers' constant availability and burnout (Wood & Shine, 2023). Research indicates that poor work-life balance is a significant predictor of teacher attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Cho et al., 2023). By implementing policies to allow

genuine downtime, schools and systems can help reduce stress and improve retention. Encouragingly, the post-pandemic period has brought this issue out of the shadows – it is now more openly discussed that teachers "are never off" and need the right to disconnect in order to protect their mental health and make the job sustainable (ETUCE, 2024).

## Digitalisation

A fundamental aspect of the concept of working time is that it draws a boundary of everything that is work and, therefore, also defines that which is not. One of the consequences of the changes to the teaching mode and methods that were necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis was the blurred line between work and personal life as a result of accelerated digitalisation of education. By bringing the classroom into teachers' homes and, likewise, into students' and parents' living spaces, the COVID-19 crisis blurred the traditional confines of work (e.g. working hours, environment, reach).

The broad adoption of digital communication channels facilitated by laptops and smartphones (making work portable) existed in the education sector prior to COVID-19, but was introduced sector-wide to support online learning, teaching, and all other activities during the crisis. Advanced during the crisis, digital platforms now also play an increasingly central role in education, with some national data showing as much as 90% of digital tools used in schools belonging to major tech companies' platforms (Mingot & Marin, 2024). On the one hand, the "platformisation" of education means lessons often involve multimedia content, interactive quizzes, and collaboration in virtual workspaces rather than just chalk-and-talk. On the other, the ubiquitousness of digital platforms in educational institutions and outwith, inadvertently resulted in elevated perceptions of educators' availability well beyond regular working hours. While parents and students now find it easier to reach teachers via email, messaging, or phone calls outside standard school hours, direct conversations with educators and school leaders during the project's case study visits revealed that despite recognising the importance of setting personal boundaries, many struggle to effectively implement them.

According to Chung (2022), working time flexibility is paradoxical in that it intensifies pressures on workers and drives self-exploitation rather than relieves from it. In this sense, digitalisation facilitates the integration of work and life to a degree that can undermine personal wellbeing (Chung, 2022). While remote access to organisational systems and easy communication from virtually anywhere and at any time can help to balance, for example, childcare or family needs, the expanded window of availability in the educational context can be seen as particularly concerning due to the nature of the profession. Much of the work in the education sector has a significant relational element because educators, school leaders, counsellors, and support staff are all responsible for children and young people's educational success. That success depends, to a large degree, on the quality of relationships that are developed between educational staff and the students. In this context, emotional investment in students' wellbeing is intrinsic to the work in the education sector and is accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility and care, which cannot be easily disconnected and thus extends into personal time. For this reason, many educators continue to respond to questions

or provide guidance well beyond their working hours even in spite of the negative impact this may have on personal time and wellbeing (Creagh et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, conversations with education professionals across various levels of education in Slovenia, Portugal and Malta and existing literature on long-term effects of COVID-19 on the education sector indicate the accelerated adoption of digital communication tools remains one of the main benefits to arise from the COVID-19 crisis. Digital tools continue to be used on a daily basis to facilitate communication between staff and students, as well as between colleagues. They also improve the efficiency of teaching by enabling online uploads of instructional materials and digital assessment of coursework, which means that pupils and students who are absent can access learning material and when appropriate, digitally complete their assignments (Skolverket, 2022; Mankki, 2024; Timotheou et al., 2022). Digital meetings and parent-teacher conferences continue to be conducted at least partially online. A study in Sweden described that digital parent-teacher conferences reportedly save time for teaching while increasing accessibility for parents and guardians, and are seen as a change that remains and is likely to stay (Skolverket, 2022). Indeed, the 2024 European Teacher Survey – covering Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands – showed that 85% of respondents highly preferred planning and preparation activities to be digital and 92% preferred administrative tasks to be performed digitally. Additionally, teachers prefer a blended approach to communication with students (70%) and with parents (71%) (Sonoma Learning, 2024).

Digitalisation is a complex and ongoing process affecting every sector of society, including education. No matter the context, it necessitates openness to change, willingness to adapt, resources to adopt new technologies, and creativity to utilise them. These factors can be facilitated through continuing professional development and organisational support for teachers, both for existing staff and new hires. At the same time, ongoing digitalisation can also create some burden at multiple levels, on education personnel, education institutions, and even countries, all with varying availability of resources to invest and support education systems through the ongoing change (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). As technology becomes more integrated into education, the demands on educators and staff increase, requiring them to adapt to new digital tools and new modes of working. Several factors drive the complexity, including the need for continuous professional development to keep pace with advancements, as well as the responsibility to teaching students how to navigate the vast amounts of online information critically.

The lasting impact of COVID-19 is that the crisis has contributed to placing the dialogue about digitalisation of education at the forefront of political debate. The main strategy for the EU is included in the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), which seeks to ensure high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education in Europe. To reach these goals, the EU supports Member States in enabling factors for successful digital education and training, thereby focusing on providing educators and schools with resources and training (European Commission, n.d.). The focus on training and resources for education in the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) helps teachers and students to be better prepared for the post-COVID-19 world. The plan has led to multiple MS' national recovery plans to include teacher training and digital skill development in the classroom after COVID-19 (e.g. Belgium, France, Germany, Greece,

Italy, Spain). In a study by Zancajo and colleagues (2022) most of the countries analysed had already implemented programs to provide schools with ultra-wideband connections, devices, and other additional equipment, as well as to develop educational digital content (Portugal) and national learning platforms (Germany) to support the digitalisation of schools (Zancajo et al., 2022). These are examples of the most commonly introduced resources in the European education sector after the COVID-19 crisis.

Other international organisations, such as the OECD and UNESCO, have since advocated for ambitious policy reforms to modernise education systems and demonstrate their suitability in the digital era. UNESCO mostly focuses on including marginalised groups (e.g. females, low-income groups, people with disabilities, cultural and ethnic minorities) in global digitalisation. Through digital education, UNESCO helps to build digital competencies among children and create a foundation for further digitalisation of countries and communities (UNESCO, 2024). These calls for change stem partly from the recognition that student learning needs have evolved alongside society's increased reliance on digital technologies. According to the OECD, the rapid digitalisation and involvement of private technology actors in education – accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis – might not have been feasible under pre-COVID circumstances (Zancajo et al., 2022).

## Job control and autonomy

Job control, understood as the degree of professional autonomy educators have, to influence and determine their working practices, is widely recognised as a critical factor in occupational stress. Autonomy serves as a protective factor, potentially mitigating the adverse effects of high demands, whereas limited control can intensify workplace stress. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted established teaching practices and decision-making processes, in some cases reducing educators' perceived autonomy. A 2021 survey underscored widespread dissatisfaction among teachers with school or district communication and policy implementation during the pandemic, linking such dissatisfaction directly to an increased intent among educators to leave the profession (Gillani et al., 2022). At the same time, however, the pandemic revealed notable resilience and creativity among educators. Teachers frequently found themselves compelled to devise new teaching methods, create instructional materials rapidly, and address unforeseen challenges independently. The crisis context often led to enhanced pedagogical autonomy, as inflexible curricula required adaptation and teachers innovatively engaged students under challenging conditions. Thus, the effect on autonomy has been mixed – while strategic decisions became more centralized (reducing control), day-to-day classroom decision-making in remote settings often relied on teacher initiative (increasing certain aspects of autonomy).

In the post-pandemic period, data presented in the EU Education and Training Monitor (European Commission, 2024) suggest that while professional autonomy concerning instructional methods remains relatively high across numerous EU Member States, teacher involvement in broader school decision-making processes remains limited. OECD data from before the pandemic (TALIS 2018) showed that around 42% of school principals across OECD

countries reported that teachers held substantial responsibility for decisions on school policies, curricula, and instructional approaches (OECD, 2019). The emergency nature of responses during the early stages of COVID-19 initially may have further diminished teacher participation in decision-making, yet the pandemic also illuminated the importance of incorporating educators' perspectives into crisis management, given that the effectiveness of responses often depended significantly on feedback from classroom practitioners.

General literature on OSH highlights a close link between chronic occupational stress and job dissatisfaction, particularly mediated by emotional exhaustion, diminished self-efficacy, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Jurado et al., 2019). Interestingly, despite some evidence suggestin that educators tend to experience higher occupational stress levels than in others professions, educators tend to also report comparatively elevated job satisfaction (Redin & Erro-Garces, 2020). This phenomenon is often explained through educators' intrinsic motivation, strong sense of purpose, and high levels of self-efficacy, factors known to underpin sustained engagement and effective stress management (Burić et al., 2019). Educators reporting higher job satisfaction tend to experience greater control over their work, demonstrate confidence in their professional abilities, and benefit from supportive relationships among colleagues, factors collectively sustaining motivation and resilience.

## Support and resources

The availability of support and resources for both material resources (technology, teaching materials, safe facilities) and psychosocial support (collegial support, counselling, mentoring) – became critical during and post-pandemic. By the 2021–2022 school year, most European countries had introduced new initiatives explicitly designed to support educators in addressing pandemic-related challenges. According to data compiled by the OECD and the EU, over 60% of these countries reported implementing specialised teacher training programmes aimed at enhancing teachers' capacity to support students' mental health and overall well-being as part of their COVID-19 response measures (OECD, 2022). Furthermore, roughly two-thirds of countries invested in professional development targeted at improving educators' digital competencies during the 2020–2021 period, responding to the urgent requirements associated with remote and hybrid teaching formats.

Beyond practical resources, psychosocial and interpersonal support from colleagues and school leadership plays a critical role in mitigating the negative effects of psychosocial risks. Such support is especially important during crises (Ozbay et al., 2007). However, existing research highlights complexities regarding social support, noting that the subjective perception of lacking support often carries more significant psychological implications than the tangible support actually received. In other words, even if organisational support measures are formally in place, educators might still perceive insufficient support if key aspects remain unaddressed or unmet (Tomic, 2011). Consequently, perceptions of support are arguably more influential in determining educators' experiences of stress and well-being than objective indicators of support provision alone.

### 2.4.1.2. Work environment (organisational context)

The work environment of educators depends strongly on the characteristics of their employing organisation. Factors, such as job security, organisational justice, and quality of leadership, form the context in which educators operate, significantly impacting their experiences of stress and overall job satisfaction (Kravale-Pauliņa et al., 2023).

#### Job security

The COVID-19 crisis initially created widespread uncertainty within labour markets. However, the education sector across most European countries generally avoided mass layoffs, as educational institutions continued to operate, often facilitated by government support. By 2021-2022, rather than facing job losses, many European countries were experiencing or anticipating teacher shortages, as older teachers retired or took leave, and fewer new teachers entered the profession (Pereira, 2024). The education sector is generally one in which workers have high job security, with fully qualified teachers usually employed under permanent (indefinite) contracts (European Commission/EACEA/Euydice, 2021). Temporary or fixed-term contracts are also prevalent in some cases, such as for example substitution for other teachers that are on leave, or for new teachers on probationary periods.

Nevertheless, job security is not universally guaranteed across all levels of education. In higher education institutions (HEIs), temporary contracts are prevalent, for example, in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, and across the Nordic region (Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2021). Early-career academics, particularly those in precarious and marginalised positions, tend to bear the greatest burden of demanding job environments. Lack of job security and career-related ambitions can result in educators feeling unable to voice concerns about working conditions. In order to improve career advancement prospects, job satisfaction, and the attractiveness of academia as a viable career path for younger talent, temporary contracts should be made less popular in favour of permanent or fixed-term contracts.

### 2.4.1.3. Workplace interactions and behaviours (social context)

A profession in education is highly relational, therefore, the social environment within educational workplaces, specifically, how people interact and behave with each other, is a critical determinant of professional action. As well as to educators' psychosocial wellbeing. This encompasses relationships and dynamics among teachers, students, parents, school leadership, and colleagues. Positive social support and a healthy culture can buffer stress and improve job satisfaction, whereas negative interactions such as violence, bullying, or poor communication can significantly increase stress and fear. The COVID-19 pandemic altered these dynamics by introducing uncertainty, increasing anxiety among students and parents, and placing greater pressure on school administration and educators. It also transformed communication channels due to an increased reliance on virtual interactions, which amplified interpersonal tensions.

#### Violence and Harassment

Aggressive behaviours, such as verbal harassment and even physical harm from students, parents and sometimes colleagues that are directed against educators, have always existed in education settings to some degree. However, pandemic-related factors have in some cases intensified the risks of violence and harassment. The disruptions to normal routines, the stress and trauma experienced by students and families, and social tension can manifest as increased aggression in schools (Fares-Otero & Trautmann, 2021). The return to in-person education post-crisis uncovered behavioural difficulties and differential learning loss among students, typically linked to the varied and challenging home environments experienced during the lockdown period (Gulmez & Ordu, 2022). Limited parental support or exposure to maltreatment during lockdown made some students more susceptible to emotional distress and behavioural issues, resulting in heightened aggression, disrespect towards peers and educators, and reduced social skills – factors that significantly complicated classroom management (Fares-Otero & Trautmann, 2021; Gulmez & Ordu, 2022).

Evidence from several European countries indicates a concerning increase in educational workplace violence post-pandemic. In France, 35% of education staff experienced verbal violence directly and online, which is a 5% rise since 2021 (Education and Solidarity Network, 2023). In Belgium, experience of violence had risen by 9%, from 27% in 2021 to 36% in 2023. These rates were slightly lower in Switzerland (30%), Spain (25%), and the United Kingdom (27%) (Education and Solidarity Network, 2023). In Italy, increasing aggressive behaviours towards teachers in schools have prompted the revival of a controversial policy that holds students accountable for their behaviour through a "grades for conduct" system (Draghia, 2024).

The blurring of boundaries facilitated by the pandemic, digitalisation, and platformisation of education has also inadvertently empowered some parents to communicate with teachers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Some parents became more confrontational during the

pandemic, possibly due to frustrations with remote learning or general stress. A meta-analysis of studies of parental violence against teachers established that parental aggression towards teachers predominantly involves non-physical forms of violence (verbal aggression) rather than physical violence (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2022). Notably, the impact of such aggression may vary according to educators' individual characteristics, such as gender, age, or experience level, suggesting differential vulnerability across groups.

In higher education, junior academic staff (e.g. (post-)doctoral researchers) represent a group vulnerable to workplace harassment, including sexual harassment. A majority of such cases go unreported, reflecting substantial power imbalances and hierarchical dynamics between temporary-contract junior staff and permanently employed senior staff (Hagerlid et al., 2024). As noted in earlier sections addressing organisational contexts, the reliance on temporary contracts within academia exposes the vulnerability of junior academics. Precarity of their position can prevent junior staff from voicing concerns regarding working conditions, harassment, or exploitation, due to fears of jeopardising future employment prospects and career progression (Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2021; Hagerlid et al., 2024). Thus, the structural insecurity inherent in temporary academic employment contracts significantly amplifies psychosocial risks faced by early-career academics.

## Students' mental health and family role

The COVID-19 crisis has had a well-documented impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (Cosma et al., 2023). School closures, social isolation, family stresses, and general uncertainty at the time collectively contributed to a surge in anxiety, depression, signs of trauma, difficulties concentrating, behavioural issues and social withdrawal among pupils in Europe (Hauschildt, 2024). For educators, this changed the psychosocial context of their work. Providing emotional support and managing students' mental health needs became a core part of teachers' responsibilities, despite typically lacking formal training as mental health professionals.

A recent Eurostudent survey conducted post-pandemic reported notably high rates of poor wellbeing among higher education (HE) students, ranging from 37% to 58% across participating countries (Cuppen et al., 2024). In eight of the 22 surveyed nations, students reporting poor wellbeing exceeded those reporting positive mental health. Moreover, the survey identified an age-based difference in student wellbeing, with younger students (under 22) generally reporting poorer wellbeing outcomes than their older counterparts (Cuppen et al., 2024). Supporting these findings, a separate study focusing on university students in Southern Europe (Bersia et al., 2024) similarly indicated predominantly negative impacts of the pandemic across various life domains, including mental health. Specifically, over half (50.2%) of Italian university students reported adverse effects on their mental health and overall wellbeing due to COVID-19. Spanish (40.3%) and Portuguese (37.8%) students reported better mental health outcomes compared to Italian students, though still notably low overall.

An important and evolving dimension impacting student mental health is cyberbullying, a phenomenon that markedly intensified during and after the COVID-19 crisis. A recent German study found that while online searches related to traditional school bullying decreased during the pandemic and remained lower thereafter, searches for cyberbullying increased by 39.5% during school closures and continued rising by an additional 13.2% after schools reopened (Rahlff et al., 2023). Researchers hypothesised that the psychological strain of social isolation may have translated into heightened aggressive behaviour online. Because young people often perceive digital interactions as less regulated and impactful compared to face-to-face environments, cyberbullying became an outlet for aggression (Rahlff et al., 2023).

These shifts in pupil and student mental health can affect educator wellbeing in two main ways: 1) *empathy fatigue* - constantly attending to others' trauma can be draining, a phenomenon akin to caregiver burnout or secondary traumatic stress. And 2) *practical stress* – the burden of trying to get through the curriculum while students struggle to cope can make educators feel ineffective or torn between roles.

## 2.5. Prevalence of psychosocial risks and their outcomes

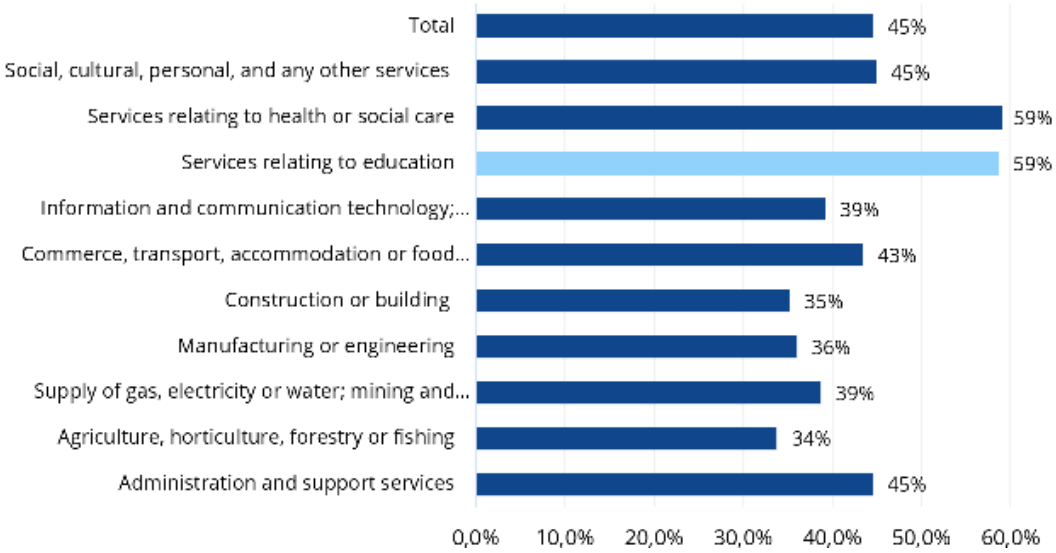
Chapters 2.2., 2.3., and 2.4. illustrate that challenging work environments and working conditions, and psychosocial risks are prevalent in the education sector. While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the profession, it has become increasingly clear that many of the challenges created by the pandemic have largely diminished alongside its acute phase. However, several issues that were already simmering prior to the 2020 outbreak and were brought out more prominently during this time, continue to persist and affect educators. As such, the pandemic's enduring influence on the prevalence of psychosocial risks and their outcomes can be viewed from two perspectives. First, positively, as it heightened awareness and prompted broader discussions about psychosocial risks within educational institutions, governmental bodies, and society at large. Second, it accelerated the surfacing and magnification of already existing strains.

### Stress

Even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the education sector was among the professions with the highest reported levels of work-related stress compared to other sectors, a phenomenon observed both in Europe and worldwide (Redín & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Agyapong et al., 2022; Irving, 2024). A systematic review of literature by Agyapong and colleagues showed that early studies reported relatively high rates of stress that are consistent with recent findings,

indicating teacher stress to be a pervasive issue that has not been successfully addressed (Agyapong et al., 2022). In 2022, EU-OSHA reported that 45% of surveyed workers in Europe across all sectors felt that work-related stress has increased as a result of the pandemic (see *Figure 3* below). This was true for 59% of those working in the education sector, representing the highest reported percentage compared to all other surveyed sectors except for services related to health and social care (Leclerc et al., 2022). A NESET report on lower secondary school teachers in the EU showed that nearly 50% of teachers experienced stress at work, ranging from 20% to 90% between EU Member States (Cefai et al., 2023).

**Figure 3.** Percentage of workers reporting that work stress increased as a result of the pandemic




Source: Visionary Analytics based on EU-Flash Eurobarometer, 2022.

Within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, occupational stress arises from an imbalance between job demands (the mental, physical, and emotional requirements of a role) and job resources (factors that assist individuals in meeting these demands or furthering personal growth) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Pressley et al., 2024). This framework is particularly fitting in education, where ongoing increases in job demands and the profession's growing complexity have been linked to stress and burnout, or both if not offset by adequate resources and support. Indeed, high workloads, long working hours beyond the contractual limit, and intensification of work in accordance with the increasing complexity of job demands in the education sector remain the most referenced sources of stress in the post-COVID literature (Agyapong et al., 2022; Creagh et al., 2023; Kreuzfeld et al., 2022; Hanula-Bobbitt & Bočkutė, 2022).

While comprehensive Europe-wide data on educators and education personnel's experiences of stress and other work-related wellbeing measures are rarely available, national studies provide valuable insights. For example, a 2022 survey in the UK showed that 82% of teachers experienced work-related stress (NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, 2023), while a more recent survey conducted in the UK reported that 41% of teachers describe their

workload as “unmanageable” and a further 37% as “just manageable” (NEU, 2024). Of those surveyed, 68% cited poor work-life balance brought on by high workload as a major cause of stress, overriding other stress sources such as insufficient staffing levels (58%) and lack of resources (45%). A wellbeing survey in Malta across various educational roles (Education Learning Support Educator, Kindergarten Educator, Teacher, Assistant Head of School, Head of Department, Head of School, and Education Officer) showed that approximately 58% of all respondents felt relaxed either “rarely” or “never”, indicating a high prevalence of stress, with kindergarten educators and teachers fairing the worst (approx. 60%) (National Education Strategy, 2024). Moreover, the 2024 School Leadership Barometer Austria reported that 41% of school principals experienced high levels of stress, heavy workload and low level of job satisfaction (Institute of Computational Perception, 2024), while in Belgium, the percentage of education staff who considered their work to be “quite” or “very” stressful had risen by 5% in the 2023 school year, 72% compared with 67% in 2021 (Education and Solidarity Network, 2023).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have traditionally been seen as relatively low stress working environments, owing to factors such as long-term job security, considerable autonomy, and strong institutional support. However, in recent years, growing competition for funding and student enrolment among vocational schools, colleges, and universities has led to increasingly high stress working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly taken a high toll on university staff’s mental and emotional health, exacerbating existing issues and triggering or increasing symptoms of overwork, stress, and emotional exhaustion (Riva et al., 2023). Yet, emerging evidence suggests that the prevalence of chronic stress in academia is more closely tied to systemic issues within the prevailing business model of higher education, rather than enduring effects of the pandemic. One of the most prominent concerns is the high level of job precariousness and casualised contracts. For example, over half of academics in Denmark are employed in temporary positions – such as PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, non-tenured assistant professors, or casual teaching fellows. In Germany, Estonia, Austria, Finland, and Serbia, only about 30% of academics are on indefinite contracts (Riva et al., 2023). This job insecurity, in combination with high workload and a highly competitive environment, is a significant and ongoing source of stress experienced by university staff.

Research indicates that job dissatisfaction and chronic stress are closely intertwined in the teaching profession, primarily through emotional exhaustion and reduced sense of self-efficacy and personal accomplishment (Jurado et al., 2019). Conversely, educators who express satisfaction tend to describe feeling in control of their work, demonstrating confidence in their individual and collective abilities, and benefiting from collegial support – factors that help sustain motivation. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, an international survey by the Education and Solidarity Network conducted in 2023 showed that almost three-quarters of education staff in Spain would choose another profession if they “had to do it all over again”. Approximately half or just over half of respondents from France, Belgium, and United Kingdom also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this statement (Education and Solidarity Network, 2023).

## Burnout

Chronic stress, when sustained over an extended period of time, can lead to lasting health issues such as chronic fatigue and professional burnout (Redin & Erro-Garces, 2020). The education sector has one of the highest work-related stress occurrences compared to other sectors. Concurrently, professional burnout among educators is also significantly higher than in other professions (Copone & Petrillo, 2020; de Laet et al., 2022). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout in the education sector was a significant challenge. For instance, in 2019, a report on Flemish secondary school teachers reported an average of 16.4 days of sick leave of which approximately 43% were due to psychosocial issues such as burnout (Agentschap voor Onderwijsdiensten, 2020). A more recent study of over 2,000 secondary schools in Flanders found between 20% to 30% of teachers to be a risk for burnout (de Laet et al., 2022) A scoping review of research articles written in English (40% European publications), reported that the prevalence of burnout among teachers ranged between approximately 25.12% to 74%. Notably, higher burnout scores and subdimensions such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (detachment from oneself) were higher among female teachers than male teachers (Agyapong et al., 2022). Despite this variance, the results of the review by Agyapong et al. (2022) show a slightly higher burnout prevalence was among males (59%) compared to females (53%).

Aggressive behaviours and violence in schools are known phenomena. Educators can be both witnesses and victims of violence. Unsurprisingly, pupils' aggression towards educators has been found to negatively impact the general wellbeing, burnout and mental health of teachers as well as their intention to leave the teaching profession (McMahon et al., 2027; Andersen et al., 2021). A study among Danish school teachers found an association between pupils' aggressive behaviour and burnout, which increased when in combination with low social support from colleagues (Winding et al., 2022). Interestingly, the study also found that high collegial support did not prevent burnout after being exposed to aggression from students. What these findings suggest is that although collegial support is often viewed as a protective factor, it may not fully buffer educators from the harmful effects of experiencing aggression. This highlights the need for preventative and remedial measures to address teacher victimisation and its consequences.

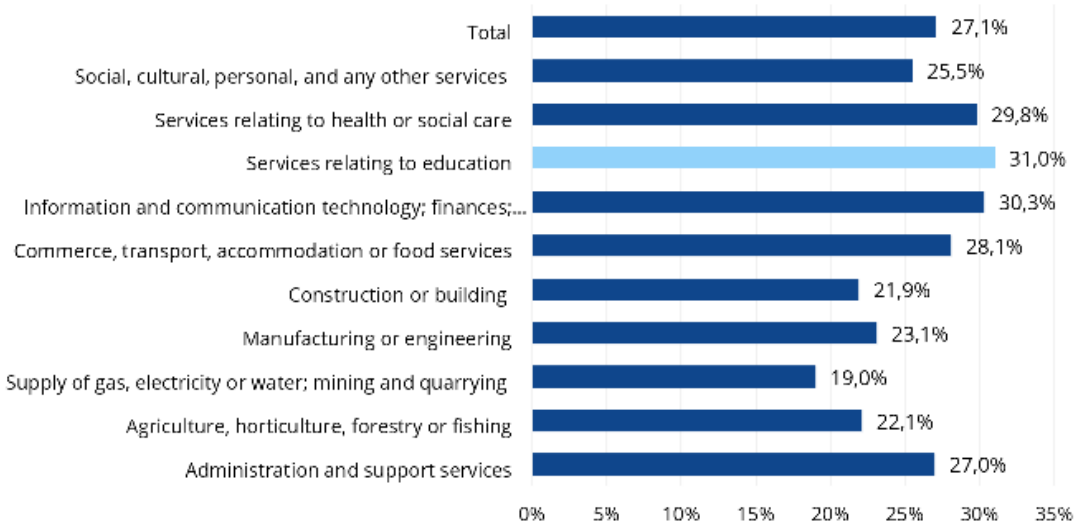
High levels of stress and burnout are increasingly cited as primary factors influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Douglas et al., 2023). Senior teachers often face lower levels of burnout, which may be attributed to the 'healthy worker effect.' This concept suggests that less motivated or emotionally exhausted teachers tend to exit the profession early, complicating the assessment of senior teachers at risk for burnout, since those at risk may have already departed the field earlier in their career (Leijen et al., 2024). These findings are concerning, considering the Europe-wide teacher shortages (Pereira, 2024). While it is already difficult to attract new entrants to the profession, it is also becoming challenging to retain them, since younger professionals may face more acute difficulties adapting to the demanding work environment, thus further compromising the quality and sustainability of this indispensable sector.

## Mental health

The root causes of occupational mental health problems in the teaching profession can largely be attributed to the combination of high workload, complexity of work, extended working time, varying levels of support and resource availability, as well as the significant amount of emotional labour inherent in the role. Emotional labour is defined as "the effort, planning and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions" (Kariou et al., 2021). In the context of teaching, emotional labour involves suppressing personal emotions and reactions in favour of demonstrating appropriate emotional responses that serve as models for students. This dynamic extends beyond interactions with students and includes increasingly complex interactions with parents. In recent years, the results that parents expect from their children's education and job prospects have escalated, intensifying demands placed on educators (Kariou et al., 2021).

For decades, two mental health issues have been extensively discussed in the context of work-related poor mental health: anxiety and depression (see Chapter 2.1.). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, evidence from EU surveys showed that about 24% of teachers felt their job negatively affected their mental health (Eurydice, 2021). Following the crisis, EU-OSHA reported that 31% of respondents from the education sector reported work-related poor mental health (see Figure 4). Country-specific evidence suggests that mental health issues have persisted following COVID-19. In a UK survey, approximately 39% of education staff had experienced a mental health issue, such as clinical anxiety or depression, in the past year (Education Support, 2024). In Spain, about 40% of teachers reported anxiety or depression symptoms, and roughly 65% consider their work very or quite stressful (Lilies, 2024). Comparative evidence points to education workers reporting higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression than workers in other sectors (Koestner et al., 2022; Conte et al., 2024).

**Figure 4.** Work-related poor mental health by sector




Source: Visionary Analytics based on EU-Flash Eurobarometer, 2022.

The prevalence of anxiety, depression, and chronic stress among educators has serious repercussions for both individuals and the broader education system. These effects can include absenteeism and long-term health problems, with some requiring medical leave. In Spain, for example, mental-health sick leave among education staff has surged – the rate of teachers taking sick leave for stress, anxiety or depression roughly tripled between 2016 and 2022 (Morales & Martinez Collado, 2023). One Support service report in Spain stated that 77% of sick-leave cases involved anxiety and 13% depression (de Rivera, 2024). The UK's 2022 Teacher Wellbeing Index reported that over 50% of staff were actively considering leaving due to pressure on mental wellbeing (Education Support, 2022).

Teacher mental health has a direct impact on the teaching quality and, therefore, student outcomes. Studies have found that elevated teacher stress can reduce the quality of their teaching and lower student motivation and can even transmit stress to students. For example, one study observed that higher teacher stress was associated with higher cortisol stress levels in primary school children (Jõgi et al., 2022). Conversely, when teachers are well, they are more engaged and supportive, benefiting learners. Thus, the mental health crisis among educators doesn't just harm teachers personally – it also impairs student learning and wellbeing and can strain school performance overall. Education authorities recognise that if teacher wellbeing is not prioritised, it will be harder to attract and retain good teachers, putting the quality and sustainability of education systems at risk (Eurydice, 2021).

Research consistently highlights the education sectors organisational aspects, such as leadership support, school climate, and as mentioned previously, manageable workload, as critical to the wellbeing of educators. Working in a collaborative school environment with collegial relationships and supportive leadership favours higher occupational wellbeing (EACEA; Eurydice; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021). Establishing strong,

supportive relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and administrators has been linked to lower rates of burnout, particularly among teachers in primary and secondary education (Capone et al., 2019). Such connection promotes a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and emotional support – factors that buffer stress. For example, a French nationwide survey (Baromètre du bien-être) found that work-life balance, a sense of purpose in work, and respect and trust from leadership were the top drivers of secondary teachers' job satisfaction (Bechichi & Blouet, 2023). Conversely, strained or negative interactions in the workplace often contribute to a feeling of isolation and exacerbate stress levels, leading to more pronounced mental health challenges.

The COVID-19 crisis has shone a light on people's mental and physical wellbeing. EU-OSHA's OSH Pulse report suggests that 54% of surveyed workers in the education sector believe that COVID-19 has made it easier to talk about stress and mental health at work (Leclerc et al., 2022). The global health crisis has certainly brought the concerns of occupational safety and health to the forefront of every workplace, including education. It has played a role in increasing awareness of psychosocial risks and mental health. While more and more resources are available to support mental health, it has not yet entirely lost its taboo. For example, 59% of UK education staff reportedly would not openly share mental health issues or workload-induced stress with their employer (Education Support, 2022). Resistance to sharing mental health issues at work is largely driven by the fear of stigma, discrimination, and negative career consequences. Despite widespread experiences of mental health issues in education, there is still a tendency to remain silent, particularly as it relates to the workplace dimensions of wellbeing and how the work environment influences the perception of good or poor mental health.

# 3. Social partners' perception of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the psychosocial risks in the education sector

## 3.1. Overview of survey methodology and data

The online survey was designed to collect the views of education trade unions and education employers' representatives on working conditions, psychosocial risks, and workplace support mechanisms in the education sector following the COVID-19 crisis. These stakeholder groups were targeted because they hold strategic and practical insights into sector-wide good practices, challenges, policy implications, and potential mitigation strategies. The questionnaire employed for the survey is provided in Annex 1.

The survey was launched in April 2024 and remained open until June 30th, 2024. It was conducted via the Alchemer platform, ensuring compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). To maximise the response rates and inclusivity, the questionnaire was made available in six official European languages, namely, English, French, German, Portuguese, Polish, and Russian.

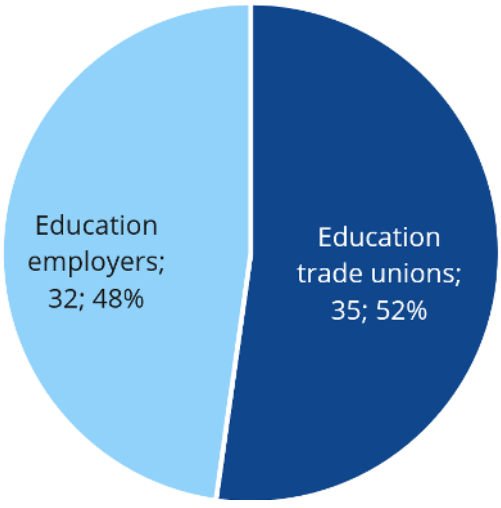
The survey was structured around three key themes:

- *Working conditions*: working time, workload, pressure at work; available support and resources.
- *Psychosocial risks*: enabling factors and prevalence of psychosocial risks and outcomes.
- *Good practices* related to the use of Joint Practical Guidelines.

After data collection, responses were systematically reviewed and cleaned, with incomplete surveys or duplicates removed to ensure data integrity. Quantitative responses were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis. A total of 67 responses were analysed (see *Figure 5* for a breakdown of respondents by affiliation).

By gathering input from trade union and employer representatives, the survey captures insights from stakeholders who are actively shaping and responding to changes in the education sector. Their institutional vantage points allow them to comment on the broader systemic challenges and thus, provide pointers of policy implications.

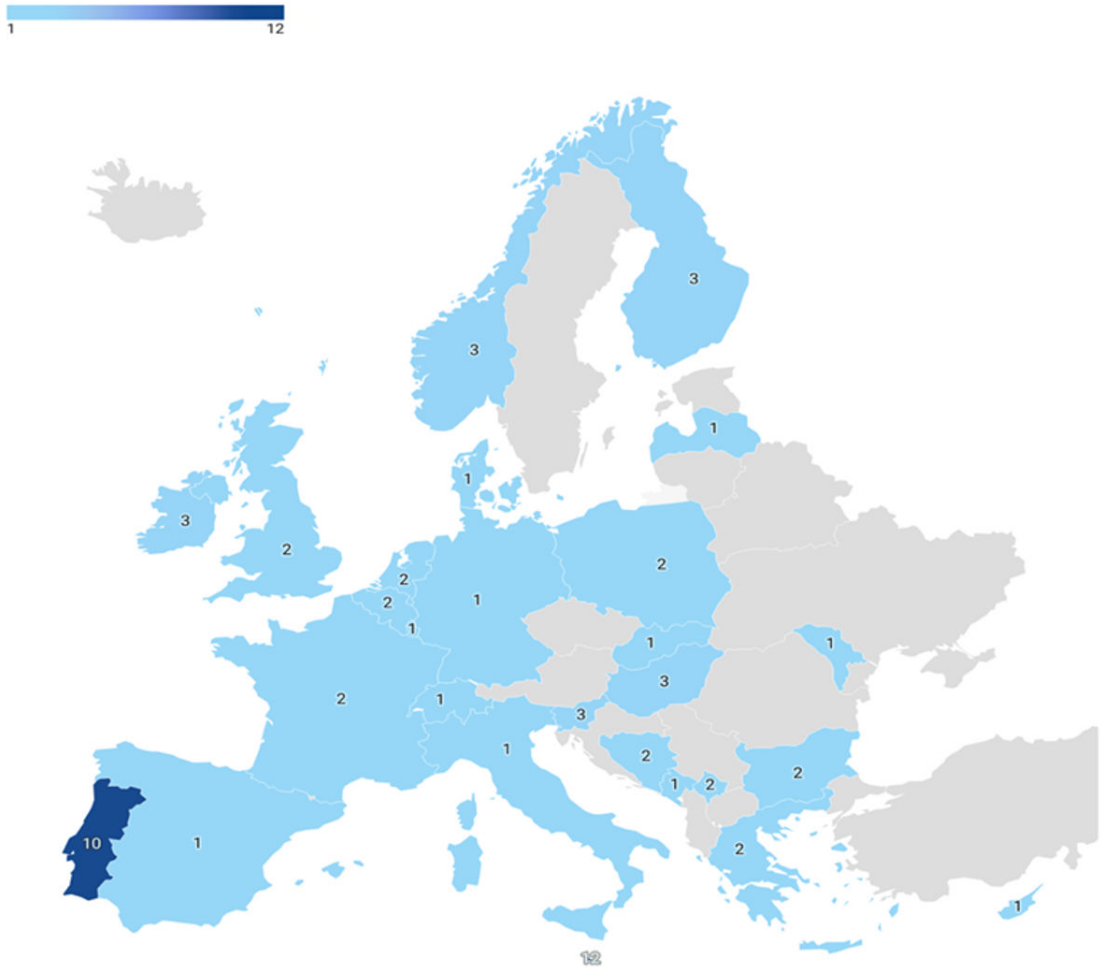
**Figure 5.** Breakdown of respondents by affiliation




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.

The responses were distributed across 28 countries (see *Figure 6* for a breakdown by country). Although most countries received, on average, approximately two responses each, Portugal and Malta were notably more active, with 10 and 12 responses, respectively.

**Figure 6.** Survey respondents per country




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.

A number of potential limitations of the survey should be considered when interpreting survey findings:

- *Limited sample size*. Given the diversity of perspectives that the survey aimed to capture – trade union representatives and employer representatives across different levels of education and covering a large number of countries – the moderate total number of responses (67) restricts the generalisability of findings.
- *Uneven distribution across countries*. The responses are unevenly distributed across 28 countries, which results in disparities in the extent to which national perspectives are represented. In particular, Portugal (10 responses) and Malta (12 responses) are represented more heavily compared with the rest of the countries, which may inadvertently skew the results.

- *Potential response bias*. The results of the survey may be influenced by a response bias, where certain groups or regions are overrepresented due to higher engagement levels or varying levels of interest in the topic:

    - Respondents with strong opinions or experiences of psychosocial risks in the education sector may have been more motivated to participate, which could potentially lead to an overemphasis on negative or problematic aspects of COVID-19 impact.
    - Cultural or national differences across the 28 surveyed countries may influence how risks are perceived and the extent to which they are reported.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations, the analysis and findings of the survey offer a timely and insightful snapshot of the sector-wide implications of the post-COVID-19 environment on working conditions and psychosocial wellbeing. Education trade union representatives and education employer representatives, by nature of their roles, are well placed to identify and advocate for the most pressing issues in the education sector. As such, the outcomes of the analysis in the following chapter are twofold:

- To illuminate social partner perception and collective understanding of the state of play psychosocial risks in the education sector, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context.
- To highlight critical areas that warrant policy attention and resourcing to support education personnel's workplace wellbeing and enhance resilience of education systems going forward.

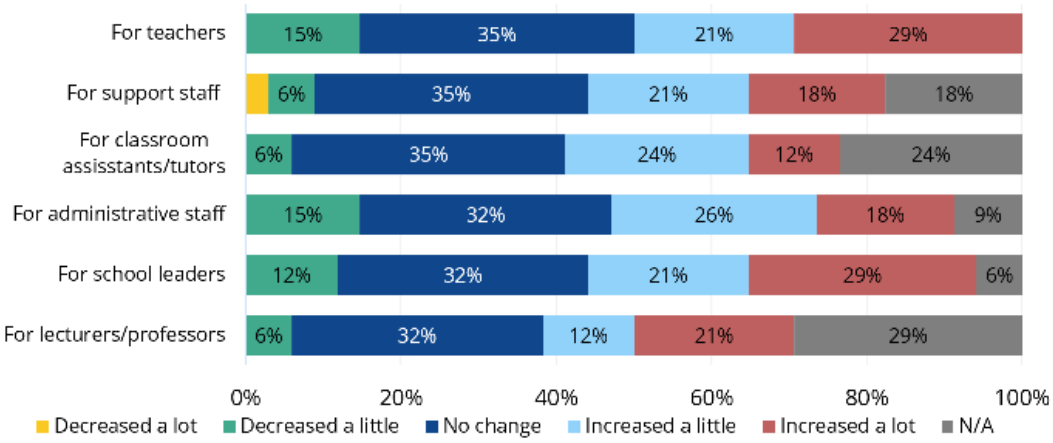
## 3.2. Discussion of findings

### 3.2.1. Working conditions

**Working time** reflects the number of hours worked (both paid and unpaid) and is directly impacted by factors such as workload, intensity of work, and even the ability to disconnect from work-related duties (ILO, 2018). As discussed in *Chapter 2.4.*, official historical data suggests that, on average, education personnel have worked fewer hours than the cross-sectoral average, approximately four hours less per week by 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Yet, it is well documented that actual working time (as opposed to regulated working hours) within the education sector has been steadily increasing due to the need to manage difficult workloads.

According to surveyed education trade union representatives, this trend is partially reflected in their responses (see *Figure 7* below). The most notable rise in working time since the COVID-19 crisis was noted among school leaders: 31% of respondents reported working time has "increased a lot", while 22% said it has "increased a little". Approximately half of the respondents perceived an increase in teachers' working time, with 29% noting it has "increased a lot" and 21% - "increased a little". Most commonly, however, trade union representatives believed there had been no change in working time across the different educational roles, suggesting that COVID-19 did not substantially alter the already prevalent trend of long working hours in the education sector.

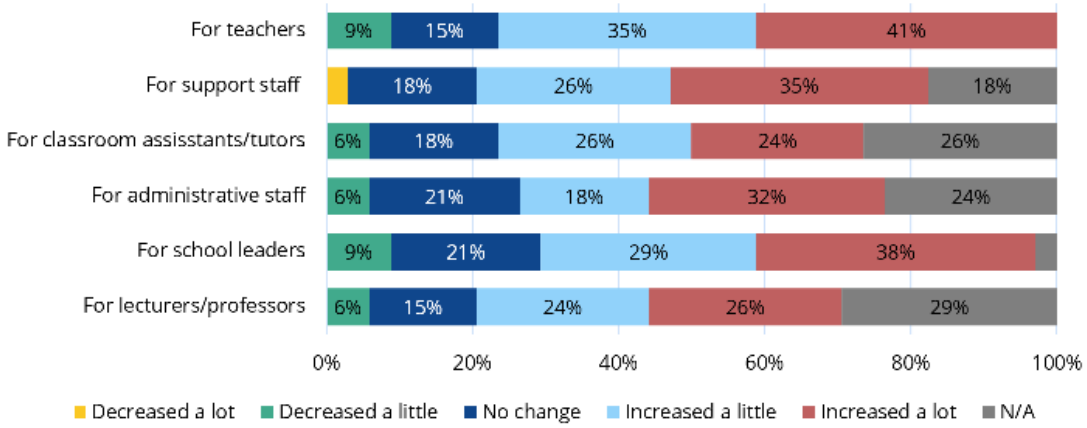
**Figure 7.** Perceived change in working time of education professionals since the COVID-19 crisis




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Data shows the views of trade union representatives, n = 34.

**Excessive workload** is among the most frequently reported issues for education professionals across Europe and has become a widespread concern in the face of staff shortages and decreasing attractiveness of a profession in the sector. This view is also echoed by education trade union representatives (see *Figure 8*). From their perspective, workloads have increased, either a lot or a little, for all personnel since the COVID-19 crisis, with 65% to 76% of respondents indicating such increase. This widespread perception is particularly concerning, as heavy workloads can heighten stress levels, which, when prolonged, may lead to burnout and other mental health challenges. Ultimately, these compounding issues affect the willingness of educators to remain in the profession.

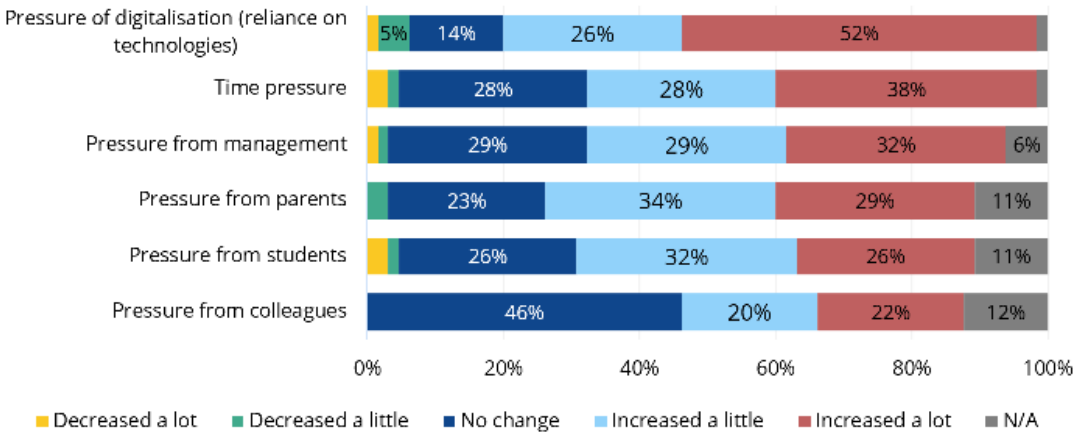
**Figure 8.** Perceived change in workload of education professionals since the COVID-19 crisis




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Data shows the views of trade union representatives, n = 34.

Educators at all levels, from primary schools to universities, face multiple sources of pressure at work. Notably, from the education trade union and employer representatives' perspective, the highest increase in pressure at work is due to the **pressure of digitalisation** (see *Figure 9*). 53% of the respondents believe that pressure of digitalisation has "increased a lot" and a further 27% believe it has "increased a little". Educators are expected to integrate technology into teaching and other work activities. This shift was dramatically accelerated by COVID-19 with educators having to adopt and learn new digital tools and platforms on top of their regular work. In Europe, for instance, data from Cedefop's Skills Survey showed that over 63% of teaching professionals had to acquire new digital technology skills to do their job post-crisis, a significantly higher proportion than among workers in most other fields (Cedefop, 2022). This "forced upskilling" illustrates how widespread the pressure of digitalisation had been, which is also reflected in the views of representatives.

**Figure 9.** Sources of pressure at work




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Data shows the cumulative views from both trade union representatives' and education employers' perspectives, n = 65.

The issue of **pressure from parents** towards educators and school leaders, often related to their children's academic performance, is particularly prevalent in primary and secondary education. Educators generally see family involvement as positive, however, excessive and adversarial parental demands can be a significant source of stress in the workplace. Of all survey respondents, 33% believe that pressure from parents has "increased a lot" since the COVID-19 crisis, while 38% believe it has "increased a little".

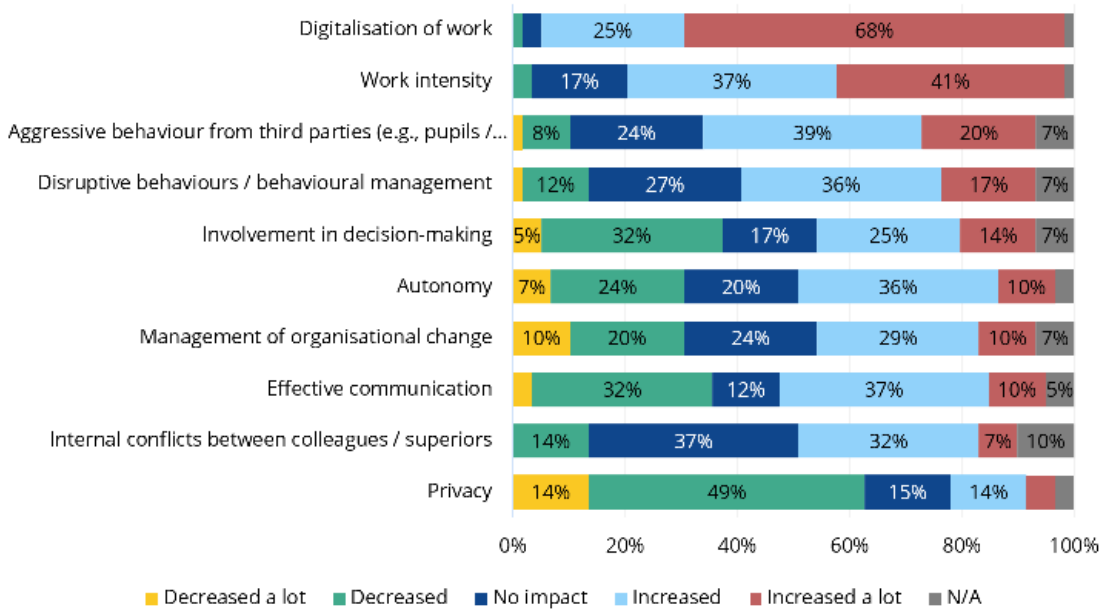
Moreover, **time pressure** is a nearly universal challenge, also present in the education sector. Therefore, 39% and 28% of the survey respondents reported that time pressure in the education sector has "increased a lot" and "increased a little", respectively. The impact of chronic time pressure is profound because it is indivisible from issues related to working time, workload, and work intensity, all of which have an impact on educator wellbeing, increasing stress and the risk of psychosocial issues. High time pressure also means that teachers have less capacity to plan lessons creatively or provide thorough and individualised feedback, which in turn can affect job satisfaction and the quality of education that learners receive.

### 3.2.2. Prevalence of psychosocial risks

Psychosocial risks in the workplace arise from numerous sources and factors, both occupational and individual, that intersect and affect the wellbeing of educators. Their prevalence is evident in existing literature (see Chapter 2), in first-hand accounts from education professionals working at various levels of education, and the perspectives representatives who advocate for better working conditions in the sector.

*Figure 10* provides an overview of survey respondents' perceptions regarding the increase in factors affecting psychosocial risks in the education sector following the COVID-19 crisis.

**Figure 10.** Impact of the COVID-19 crisis by aspects affecting workplace wellbeing




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Data shows the cumulative views from trade union representatives' and education employers' perspectives, n = 59.

The **digitalisation of work** is a prominent theme when discussing COVID-related changes in educational settings. According to the survey, 74% of the respondents believe it has either increased (31%) or increased a lot (41%) since the COVID-19 crisis. This shift affects workplace wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. Technostress, the strain caused by information and communication technologies, has become a growing concern (Cazan et al., 2024). Educators are faced with constant computer use and multitasking between emails, e-learning systems, video calls, and messaging at work and outwith, which can lead to mental fatigue. Despite its various benefits, digitalisation has increased overall workload and screen time, contributing to chronic time pressure and stress. Unsurprisingly, 59% of the survey respondents believe that digitalisation of work is a significant factor impacting work-related mental health of the education profession (see *Figure 11* below).

**Figure 11.** Risk factors which had the most impact on work-related mental health in the teaching profession

Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Data shows the cumulative views from trade union representatives' and education employers' perspectives, n = 59.

Another observed trend, corroborated by recent literature discussed in the previous chapter, direct conversations with education personnel during project case studies, and survey responses from education trade unions and education employers' representatives, is the **rise in aggressive behaviours from third parties (pupils and parents)**. As seen in *Figure 10* above, 45% and 25% of the survey respondents reported aggression from third parties has "increased" or "increased a lot", respectively, since the COVID-19 crisis. Violence and harassment in the workplace pose serious risks to educators' mental health, job satisfaction, and willingness to stay in the profession. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, EU Talis data reported that 14.1% of teachers were being intimidated or verbally abused by students "quite a bit" or "a lot" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021). Moreover, it is estimated that between 17% to 50% of new teachers leave within the first five years, often due to adverse teaching conditions including violence and lack of respect (Badanes-Ribera et al., 2022). Reflecting these concerns, it is the second most cited psychosocial risk factor, with 63% of the survey respondents believing that aggressive behaviours are having a significant impact on work-related mental health (*Figure 11*).

Even when student misbehaviour falls short of outright aggression, **disruptive behaviour in the classroom** is a major psychosocial stressor for educators. Habitual disruptive behaviour in class contributes to teacher burnout, especially emotional exhaustion. The differential conditions in which students attended classes online during the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in learning loss and the loss of secondary socialisation, which is foundational to children and young people's development. This, in turn, increased the need for more intense behavioural management.

Survey responses also reflect this trend, with approximately 60% of all respondents reporting disruptive behaviours having increased since the COVID-19 crisis (*Figure 9*).

While various factors contributing to psychosocial risks in the post-COVID education sector have intensified, **privacy** – a critical boundary between work and personal life – has notably declined. According to the survey, 38% of education trade union and employers surveyed representatives reported that privacy of education professionals has either "decreased" or "decreased a lot". Several reasons for the loss of privacy have been identified in the literature and through direct conversations with teachers, school leaders, counsellors, and other staff members as part of projects case study visits. the widespread shift to digital communication tools during the COVID-19 crisis remains prevalent, making it easier for students and parents to reach educators at any time. The first source of the loss of privacy came during the crisis, when teachers had to "let students into their homes" for the first time, in order to conduct classes online. A secondary loss of privacy that persists today is the lack of distinction between educators' working and personal time and space. Educators are often contacted outside of working hours and thus, cannot easily truly disconnect from work-related matters. Over time, remaining emotionally and mentally at work can damage mental health and personal relationships.

Many work-related and often interrelated factors contribute to education professionals' mental health. However, **excessive workload and work intensity** remain the single highest cited factor diminishing mental wellbeing in education. Corroborating various evidence from the literature (see Chapter 2), a significant majority of education trade unions and education employers' representatives (78%) believe that excessive workload and work intensity has had the greatest impact on work-related wellbeing in the teaching profession (Figure 11).

## Available support and resources

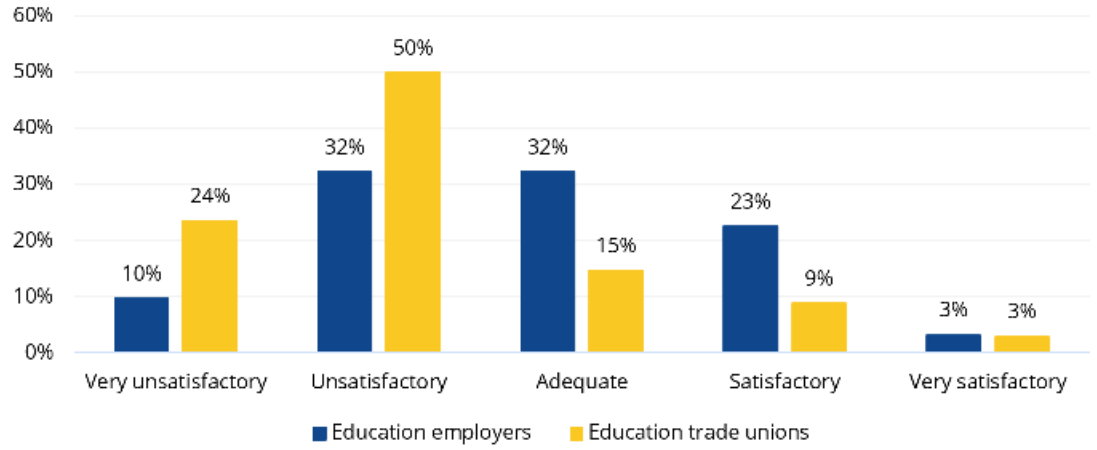
The quality of working conditions is, in many respects, declining across the education sector. For this reason, people working in the education sector and those that are considering a career in education must be supported through the challenges. We asked education trade unions and employers' representatives which resources are available in the sector to support educators' wellbeing at work. Survey responses indicate that there is a strong emphasis on pedagogical support – the three most cited resources were continuous professional development (64% of respondents), initial teacher training (62%), and exchange of good practices (52%) (see *Figure 12* below). Education institutions across Europe are required to provide initial teacher training and regular continuous training opportunities, to keep educators engaged, providing fresh strategies to manage workload and student issues, thus, indirectly supporting mental health. However, the availability of direct workplace wellbeing support appears more limited. Fewer than half of the respondents noted there is targeted support for workplace wellbeing of educators, such as healthcare provision (41%) and psychology support services (41%).

**Figure 12.** Resources available to support wellbeing at work

Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: n = 66.

Overall satisfaction with the available resources for educators' wellbeing appears to be low, though perceptions vary between education trade union representatives and education employers' representatives. Trade union representatives tend to view the situation more negatively than their employer counterparts. According to the survey, 74% of trade union respondents rated the quality of resources as either "unsatisfactory" (50%) or "very unsatisfactory" (24%) (See *Figure 13*). In contrast, 42% of employer representatives shared this assessment, with 32% considering the resources "unsatisfactory" and 10% "very unsatisfactory." Meanwhile, a majority of employer representatives (58%) rated the resources as "adequate" (32%), "satisfactory" (23%), or "very satisfactory" (3%), compared to approximately 27% of trade union respondents who expressed similar views. This disparity suggests differing evaluations of how effectively existing resources address the needs of education professionals, potentially reflecting variations in priorities, direct experiences, or expectations regarding workplace support.

**Figure 13.** Quality of available resources



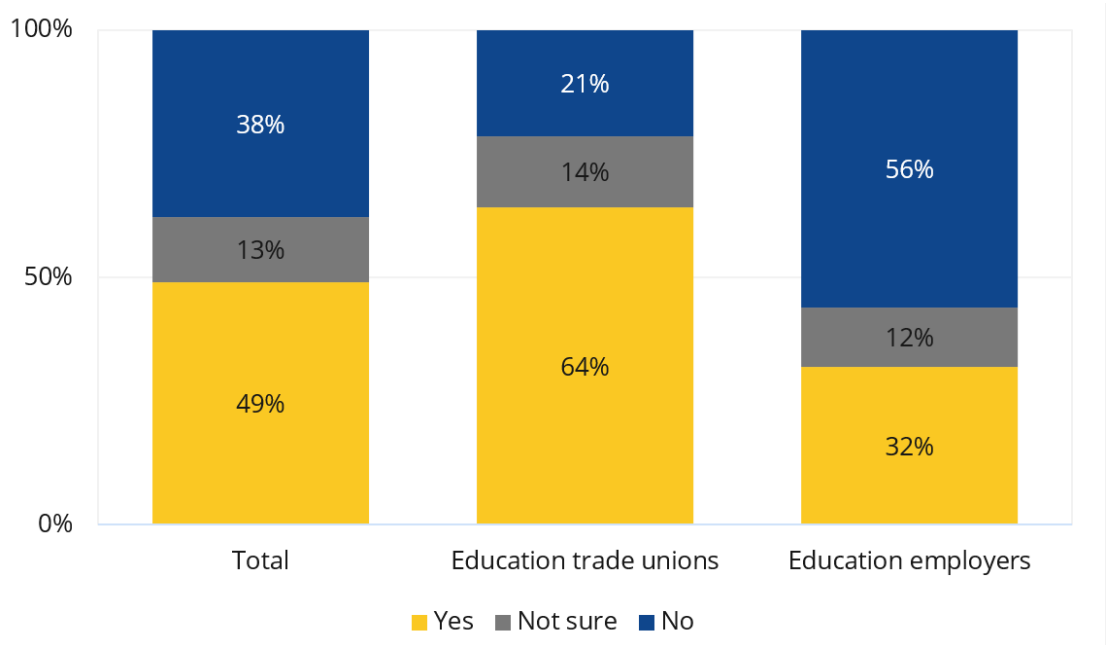

Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Education employers (n = 31), Education trade unions (n = 34).

### 3.2.3. The effectiveness of addressing psychosocial risks through social dialogue

Survey data gathered from education trade unions and employers' sheds light on the breadth and depth of actions taken thus far, as well as opportunities for further development.

Respondents of the survey were asked about their familiarity with and use of the Joint Practical Guidelines on How to Promote Joint Social Partner Initiatives at European, National, Regional, and Local Level to Prevent and combat Psychosocial Hazards in Education, developed by ETUCE and EFEE almost a decade ago in 2016. The results were generally mixed. About half of all 53 respondents (49%) were familiar with the guidelines, with notable differences between education trade union representatives (64%) and education employers (32%) (see *Figure 14* below).

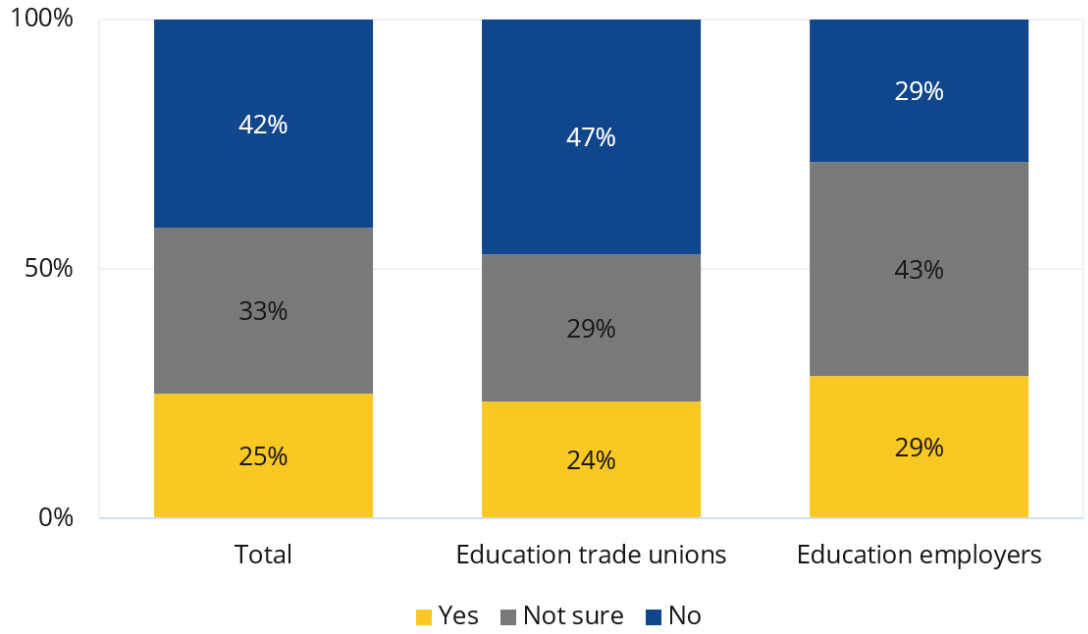
**Figure 14.** Respondents' familiarity with ETUCE and EFEE Joint Practical Guidelines (2016)




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Total n=53, Education trade unions n=25, Education employers n=28.

When asked whether the respondents were aware of specific examples of the implementation of the Joint Practical Guidelines either by their organisation or another organisation, the majority were either "not sure" (33%) or answered "no" (42%), while 25% answered "yes" (see Figure 15 below). There weren't large differences between the trade union representatives' and the education employers' answers.

**Figure 15.** Respondents' awareness of specific Joint Practical Guideline implementation examples




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: Total n=24, Education trade unions n=17, Education employers n=7.

Despite moderate familiarity and relatively low implementation of the Joint Practical Guidelines, social partners have taken numerous actions to address psychosocial risks in education. The data indicate that **training** is by far the most widely adopted measure for tackling psychosocial risks in the teaching profession, with over 64% of respondents reporting that they have provided training to their members (see *Figure 16* below). However, training alone rarely suffices; it is most effective when embedded in a broader framework of support. Notably, more than 50% of respondents state that they have **established support, advice, and mentoring structures**, as well as used **collective bargaining** to incorporate psychosocial risk considerations into formal agreements or negotiation processes. The prevalence of these measures suggests a growing awareness that support networks and formal negotiation channels can help ensure that teachers' mental health and well-being are integrated into wider employment conditions.

Further, nearly 47% of responding organisations have **developed policy, guidance, and documentation** dedicated to psychosocial risk, and 43% undertake **risk assessment** procedures. Comparative evidence from ESENER 2019 suggests that risk assessments in the education sector are being conducted regularly in most surveyed establishments (77%) (Howard, Antczak, & Albertsen, 2022). The differences in findings may reflect the differing role of social partners in supporting risk assessments in different countries and/or institutions. As such, the proportion of risk assessments being carried out in the education institutions is likely larger than is reflected in the responses from social partners who took part in the current project's survey questionnaire.

**Figure 16.** Actions taken by social partners to address PSR

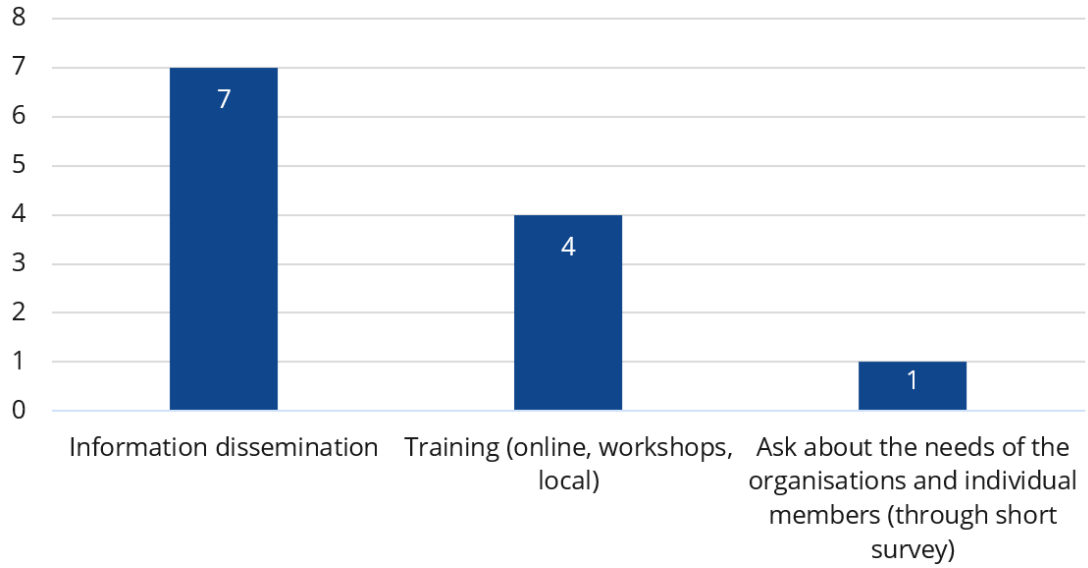
Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: n = 53

When asked about their needs for better addressing psychosocial risks, survey respondents highlight three clear areas for further support (see Figure 17 below):

1. **Information dissemination** – The most frequently mentioned requirement indicates that organisations and individuals seek accessible and user-friendly materials on psychosocial risk management.
2. **Training (online, workshops, local)** – Even though training is already widespread, four respondents emphasised the need for a sustainable, flexible, and context-specific approach to ensure long-term impact.
3. **Engaging organisations and individual members in identifying specific needs** – one respondent noted the importance of surveys or other feedback mechanisms, reflecting a desire for a participatory approach that tailors interventions to actual needs rather than assumed priorities.

That said, focusing purely on greater volumes of information or training can overlook the importance of quality and follow-up mechanisms. Overreliance on one-off workshops, for example, might lead to raising conversations without actionable strategies that make a tangible difference in day-to-day school practices. The data thus points to a need for consistent, structured, and evidence-informed interventions, underpinned by clear roles, responsibilities, and monitoring.

**Figure 17.** Social partners' needs for better PSR prevention




Source: Visionary Analytics, Survey 2024.
Note: n = 13

Overall, the actions already taken by social partners reflect a continuous and growing commitment to addressing psychosocial risks in education. Stakeholders are investing in building capacity through training, mentoring, and policy frameworks. Where robust, these initiatives can bring about positive changes in school culture and teacher wellbeing. Nonetheless, several interconnected opportunities for improvement emerge:

- **Strengthening systematic risk assessment**. Although nearly half of organisations report conducting risk assessments, a comprehensive and continuous risk management cycle is needed to prevent psychosocial risks. Regularly assessing and re-assessing workplace psychosocial hazards can help ensure that interventions remain relevant and targeted.
- **Embedding PSR interventions in broader structures**. Formally establishing dedicated bodies or committees focused on psychosocial wellbeing can bolster accountability, strategic planning, and follow-through. Such structures also facilitate ongoing dialogue between trade unions and employers to align objectives and share best practices.
- **Enhancing communication and raising awareness**. Dissemination of clear, concise, and practically oriented information can help enhance awareness without contributing to information fatigue. A multi-channel approach (online portals, newsletters, local events) can increase accessibility and encourage engagement among teachers, school leaders, and other staff.
- **Collective bargaining and continuous social dialogue**. Collective bargaining agreements can enshrine provisions that safeguard mental health, reduce excessive workload, and create supportive work environments. Ongoing social dialogue should aim to ensure that these measures remain dynamic, responsive to emerging challenges, and mutually beneficial for all stakeholders.

# 3.3. Social dialogue practices to prevent and manage PSR in education

## 3.3.1. European measures

This section explores the evolution of EU policy to OSH challenges, with a focus on how psychosocial risks. The EU-level developments discussed below (legislation, agreements, tools, guidelines), reflect a growing awareness of the mental health challenges faced by workers and the evolution of occupational health and safety is addressed.

### Occupational Safety and Health in Europe

At the European level, the protection of workers' psychosocial wellbeing is grounded in the general occupational safety and health legislation. The cornerstone is the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC (1989), which obliges employers to ensure the safety and health of workers "in every aspect related to the work." This broad mandate, alongside the Directive's requirement for risk assessment and prevention (Article 6), has been interpreted to include psychosocial risks, even though they are not explicitly named. There is, however, no dedicated EU directive focused solely on psychosocial risks (Eurofound, 2022). Over the years, other EU directives have indirectly supported psychosocial risk prevention, for example, working time regulations aimed at ensuring rest periods (2003/88/EC) or the equality directives aimed at addressing harassment as a form of discrimination (i.e., 2000/78/EC and 2000/43/EC), however, legislative gaps remain.

In the absence of specific legislation, European social dialogue has been critical in advancing psychosocial risk prevention and management. Notably, the European cross-sectoral social partners concluded two framework agreements: on Work-related Stress (2004) and Harassment and Violence (2007), negotiated by social partners at cross-sectoral level (Eurofound, 2022). These EU-level agreements recognise psychosocial hazards as collective challenges. They were implemented via autonomous national measures, raising awareness and prompting many Member States to develop guidelines or include psychosocial provisions in national law. While not legally binding, these agreements have had a significant impact in mainstreaming concepts of stress prevention and anti-bullying policies across Europe.

The 2014-2020 OSH Strategic Framework was the first official EU-level OSH Framework to explicitly and prominently address psychosocial risks. It focused on steering stakeholders towards new priorities and prevention measures and introduced new fields for study such as psychosocial risks, musculoskeletal disorders and mental health problems due to their complexity and importance for OSH (Del Castillo, 2016). The current EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work is currently being implemented for the period 2021-2027 and focuses on three key priorities: "(1) anticipating and managing change in the context

of green, digital and demographic transitions; (2) improving the prevention of work-related accidents and diseases, and striving towards a Vision Zero approach to work-related deaths; (3) increasing preparedness to respond to current and future health crises" (EU-OSHA, n.d.).

EU legislation on OSH is supported by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) since 1994 and the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work (ACSH) since 2003. These institutions collect information, raise awareness, assist the European Commission with preparation, implementation and evaluation of activities in the fields of safety and health at work, identify OSH policy priorities, and establish strategies to reach OSH goals (Del Castillo, 2016).

EU-OSHA runs multiple research projects to identify OSH policy priorities. The 2022-2025 research project "on work-related psychosocial risks and mental health at work for policy, prevention, awareness-raising and practice" is a foundational project to inform the 2026-2028 EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign on "mental health and psychosocial risks at (EU-OSHA, n.d.). The education sector has already been highlighted as one of the sectors at risk.

## Tools and guidelines for the EU education sector

Building on the cross-sector accords, the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) has produced its own tools to addressed psychosocial risks.

- In 2016, ETUCE and EFEE jointly issued "**Practical Guidelines on How to Promote Joint Social Partner Initiatives to Prevent and Combat Psychosocial Hazards in Education**." These guidelines provided concrete recommendations to education authorities, school leaders, and social partners on fostering healthy workplaces in the education sector. The practical guidelines are currently being revised as part of this project.
- The **Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence and Work** was presented in 2007 by the four European cross-industry social partners,. The agreement condemns, seeks to prevent and manage all forms of harassment and violence at work. This includes problems of bullying, sexual harassment, and physical violence, and gives the responsibility of protection of employees to the employer (COM/2007/686).
- Following the implementation of this Framework Agreement, the European Trade Union Committee for Education launched an **Action Plan on "Preventing and Tackling Violence in Schools"** in 2008, which was then updated in 2010. The revision drew from the knowledge gained during the first two years and included the prevention and tackling of cyber-harassment or cyber-bullying. It was found that violent incidents, while not incredibly common at the time, distressed all those directly involved, as well as witnesses (ETUCE, 2010).
- The recently revised "European Multi-Sectoral Social Partners' Guidelines to prevent and tackle third-party violence and harassment related to Work", also referred to as the TPVH. As previously stated, 45% and 25% of the survey respondents reported that

aggression from third parties has "increased" or "increased a lot", respectively, since the COVID-19 crisis (see Figure 9). This is not isolated to the education sector, which led EU social partners in five sectors to revise the 2010 Multi-Sectoral Guidelines to Tackle Third-Party Violence and Harassment Related to Work in 2025. Key revisions relevant to educational staff include information on digitalisation, the need for sufficient staffing levels, the denormalization of TPVH at work, and improving the implementation of the guidelines (ETUCE, 2024).

- **The OiRA (Online interactive Risk Assessment) tools** are tailored to address psychosocial risks. The software, developed at EU-level by EU-OSHA with European social partners, can help sectoral social partners and national authorities to produce sector-specific risk assessments and reduce occupational illnesses and accidents to improve overall working conditions (EU-OSHA, n.d.). In collaboration with ETUCE and EFEE, EU-OSHA has released the OiRA tools for Early Childhood Education, Secondary Education, and Higher Education and Research since 2019. Several educational levels were chosen at the launch by the collaborating parties, because multiple risk factors were identified, especially psychosocial risks (stress, harassment, and violence). To prevent and combat the risk factors, the OiRA project aims to promote decent and healthy workplaces by transposing the OiRA tools to the national level through national OSH partners.
- **The OiRA tools tailored specifically for Higher Education and Research institutions were published in 2024**. In addition to the features of the tools for ECEC and secondary education, several features were adapted for the unique needs of the HER sector, including risk assessments for workshops, laboratories, and research activities, customisable action planning, and a modular structure that makes it suitable for institutions of all sizes, local regulations, and circumstances. National OSH partners are actively promoting the tool to use across Europe and reduce occupational risks in the HER sector (ETUCE, 2019; 2024).
- The ongoing **Autonomous Agreement of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) on Telework and the Right to Disconnect** (ETUCE, 2024). This recent agreement is relevant to the education sector, especially since the rise of digitalisation during the COVID-19 crisis, is the ongoing Autonomous Agreement of the ESSDE on Telework and the Right to Disconnect. Currently there are yet to be sectoral approaches to telework and the right to disconnect in education, but with the growing need to address work-life balance, it is important for the sector to have this autonomous agreement. The negotiations showcase the rise of digitalisation of the sector, as well as the sectors' vulnerability for new developments without sufficient protections for its staff (ETUCE, 2024).
- Beyond employer obligations, the EU has advanced softer measures to promote psychosocial wellbeing in education. In 2023, the European Commission adopted a new "Comprehensive Approach on Mental Health," accompanied by a proposed Council Recommendation on mental health. This non-legislative initiative (June 2023) dedicates one of its eight pillars to "tackling psychosocial risks at work," acknowledging that adverse work environments can lead to conflicts, burnout, and high turnover in sectors like education (European Commission, 2023). The Commission's Communication highlights the importance of protective measures such as the right to disconnect,

support for returning to work after mental illness, and ensuring a "psychologically safe working environment". It also announces an EU-level review of how Member States are addressing psychosocial risks, with a view to potentially strengthening EU action in this area.

- Another recent development specific to education is the "**Guidelines for school leaders, teachers and educators to address wellbeing and mental health at school**", issued by a Commission expert panel on supportive learning environments (European Commission, 2022). These guidelines promote a whole-school approach to wellbeing, linking staff working conditions to student outcomes. For example, they recommend that schools establish policies for staff mental health, facilitate access to counselling, and train school leaders in psychosocial risk prevention (in line with the UNESCO "Global report on happiness in and for learning" and the OECD "Future of Education and Skills 2030/2040" project). Such EU-level guidelines, while voluntary, help spread best practices across countries through funding programs like Erasmus+ and the European Education Area initiatives.
- European measures, legislative and otherwise, have collectively laid the groundwork for psychosocial risk management and prevention in education. While the EU directives set minimum safety requirements, social dialogue and non-legislative tools have made it possible to directly target specific psychosocial challenges in education.

### 3.3.2. National measures

The education sector is diverse, and its systems depend heavily on their national context. The national sectors are bound and encouraged to use the European guidelines, agreements, and tools, as well as national laws, guidelines, and other initiatives. Most EU countries refer to the active EU Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health at Work (currently 2021-2027) as a foundation for developing national strategies (see *Table 2*).

**Table 2.** The mapping of the references to psychosocial risks in the national OSH strategies across EU Member States

| No. | Country | OSH Strategy (link) | Ends in (year) | Does the strategy acknowledge the threat of psychosocial risks? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Austria | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 2. | Belgium | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 3. | Bulgaria | Link | 2024 | Yes |
| 4. | Croatia | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 5. | Cyprus | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 6. | Czech Republic | Link | - | No |
| 7. | Denmark | Link | - | Yes |
| 8. | Estonia | Link | 2030 | Yes |
| 9. | Finland | Link | 2030 | Yes |
| 10. | France | Link | 2025 | Yes |
| 11. | Germany | Link | 2025 | Yes |
| 12. | Greece | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 13. | Hungary | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 14. | Ireland | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 15. | Italy | Link | - | Yes |
| 16. | Latvia | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 17. | Lithuania | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 18. | Luxembourg | Link | 2030 | Yes |
| 19. | Malta | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 20. | Netherlands | Link | 2040 | No |
| 21. | Poland | Link | 2025 | Yes |
| 22. | Portugal | Link | - | - |
| 23. | Romania | Link | - | Yes |
| 24. | Slovakia | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 25. | Slovenia | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 26. | Spain | Link | 2027 | Yes |
| 27. | Sweden | Link | 2025 | Yes |

Source: Visionary Analytics, 2025 based on EU-OSHA.

Most EU countries have included the need for prevention and management strategies of psychosocial risks in their national OSH strategies (see Table 2 above). Interestingly, only the Croatian national strategy does not address these risks, nor mental health problems, while it is quite prevalent in all other strategies (OSH WIKI, 2022). Furthermore, not all countries choose to regulate occupational safety and health at work through national strategies, instead the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, and Romania depend either on national legislation or collective bargaining agreements on national, sectoral, and organisational levels. The strategies cover at least some aspects of psychosocial risks at work, such as bullying, harassment, and violence, but many countries depend on smaller initiatives for specific sectors or problems to ensure safety and health at work.

Below, we review national measures introduced or implemented roughly since 2020, highlighting a diverse range of approaches. Measures span legislation (e.g. new OSH regulations, labour code amendments) and non-legislative actions (collective agreements, policies, and social partner initiatives). All levels of education – from early childhood to higher education – have been concerned, as countries recognise that psychosocial hazards affect staff in nurseries, schools, vocational education centres, and universities alike. We also showcase examples of good practice, many of which involve social dialogue between education trade unions and employers.

## Strengthening legal obligations

A number of EU Member States have updated their laws to more explicitly address psychosocial risks at work, which in turn benefits education staff. A leading example is **Denmark**, which in late 2020 became one of the first countries in the world to issue a dedicated Executive Order on Psychosocial Work Environment ("Bekendtgørelse om psykisk arbejdsmiljø"). This regulation, effective 1 November 2020, consolidates employers' duties to prevent psychological hazards. Crucially, it specifies risk factors that must be managed – for instance, it now "directly [states] that employers must prevent employees from becoming ill due to an excessive workload or too high time pressure," which was not explicitly spelled out before. By clearly defining psychosocial risks (including work pace, emotional demands, harassment, and violence) and requiring preventive action, the Danish rules make it easier for schools and universities to ensure healthy work environments. Danish teacher unions hailed the new order as a "huge victory" that clarifies the rules for all parties (Petersen, 2020). In practice, this means Danish education employers must assess factors like class size stress or parental harassment and take measures, so they do not lead to teacher illness.

At the end of 2024, there were various changes among Danish legislative bodies that work on the working environment in the country. The 'Arbejdsmiljørådet' (The Working Environment Council) was merged into the newly established 'Arbejdsmarkedsråd' (Labour Market Council) and a new occupational safety inspection scheme was introduced in the summer of 2024. The new council is expected to take over all functions and responsibilities of the Arbejdsmiljørådet that focused on occupational safety and health issues, as well as functions and responsibilities of the 'Beskæftigelsesrådet' (Employment Council), the 'Tilsynsrådet' (Supervisory Council), and the eight Regional Labour Market Councils (Arbejdsmiljørådet, 2024).

Several other countries in Europe have bolstered their legislation:

- **Belgium**, which already had one of the most advanced frameworks (a 2014 law on psychosocial risks), continued to refine enforcement. The Belgian law requires every employer (including schools) to implement primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention for psychosocial risks, covering work stress, violence, and sexual or moral harassment. By 2021, seven years after the law's introduction, Belgian authorities and social partners evaluated its impact, noting a need for even more proactive measures given the rise in burnout and harassment cases. One outcome has been improved guidance for the required psychosocial risk prevention advisors (Conseiller en prévention aspects psychosociaux) who operate in many school networks (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2021).
- **France** has also maintained a strong legal stance: the French Labour Code obliges employers to assess and prevent psychosocial risks, and since 2020 there is increased attention to the public education sector. Following a national consultation ("Grenelle de l'éducation" in 2020–2021) that highlighted teacher wellbeing, the Ministry of Education introduced measures to improve working conditions – for example, establishing observatories and helplines for staff mental health in each académie (region). While these are policy measures rather than new laws, they derive from existing legal duties for employers (the French Public Service also has an accord on preventing RPS since 2013) (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, n.d.; Institut des hautes études de l'éducation et de la formation, 2023).
- In **Sweden**, the Work Environment Authority's provisions on the "*Organisational and Social Work Environment*" (AFS 2015:4) became increasingly relevant during the pandemic; although enacted in 2016, since 2020 schools have used these rules to demand action on workload and work-life balance. For instance, Swedish school principals, as employers, must ensure teachers' work demands are reasonable and that support is provided to prevent stress-related ill health, under the enforceable criteria of AFS 2015:4. The regulation's impact is evident as many Swedish municipalities (school providers) have hired additional staff or adjusted teaching hours to comply with psychosocial safety requirements, often after dialogue with teacher unions. Additionally, in 2020, the **Swedish government** proposed the *Forskning, frihet, framtid – kunskap och innovation för Sverige* (Research, Freedom, Future – knowledge and innovation for Sweden) government Bill (2020/21:60). This bill contains several initiatives that aim to contribute to research on a good work environment and this includes a national research programme on mental health (Forte, 2024; Löfven & Nordmark, 2021).
- In 2022, **Lithuania** amended its Labour Code[2] to introduce the concept of "*psychological violence*" at work and prohibit it. Employers are now obliged to take preventive measures against psychological violence and harassment, with fines possible for non-compliance. This legislative change was partly a response to cases of bullying in schools and other workplaces; it gives teachers legal grounds to report and seek remedy for sustained verbal abuse or mobbing by colleagues, students, or parents. Nevertheless, application of the law appears to be limited (Leščinskaitė, 2024).

- In **Poland**, while no new OSH law has been passed for psychosocial risks, 2021 saw an educational policy proposal to reduce excessive teacher workload: the Ministry of Education floated a plan to cut school curricula by 20% to create "calmer, more effective, in-depth education" and ease pressure on both students and teachers. This proposal (under consultation in 2023–24) is essentially a psychosocial risk prevention measure, acknowledging that overloaded curricula contribute to stress. If implemented, Polish teachers would spend fewer hours on rushed content delivery, potentially lowering burnout rates.
- In **Spain**, the Ley Orgánica 3/2018 (Data Protection and Digital Rights Law) introduced the right for employees to disconnect from work-related digital communications outside working hours. This applies to teachers as well, including those in public schools. During the pandemic, Spanish teachers often found themselves "*available 24 hours a day, seven days a week*" handling emails, WhatsApp messages from parents, and online classes. The unions pressed for enforcement of the disconnect right in education, stressing that "*what was exceptional cannot become the norm*" (USO, 2020). By 2021, many regional education authorities in Spain negotiated "digital disconnection protocols" with teacher unions, specifying times (for example, after 6pm or on weekends) when teachers are not obliged to respond to work messages. However, further improvements are still being negotiated. In a 2025 survey among 7600 teachers, 67.86% of respondents state that they spend 6-10 hours a week carrying out bureaucratic tasks associated with digitalisation, which generates high levels of stress among 72.45% of respondents (UGT-Servicios Públicos, 2025).
- The **Italian** *legislative decree (81/2008)* imposes the obligation to evaluate all work-related risks for all employers (Punto Sicuro, 2022). Furthermore, because the definition of health under this decree (81/08) is "a state of complete psychical, mental and social well-being, not consisting merely in the absence of disease or infirmity", Italian legislation also clearly includes psychosocial risks in their impact assessments (Vega Formazione, n.d.).
- **Slovenia** has the Health and Safety at Work Act (ZVZD-1), which was adopted in 2011 and makes it the responsibility of employers to identify all types of hazards, prepare risk assessments for all employees, and implement measures to eliminate hazards to keep employees safe (Slovenian Business Point, n.d.). Article 24 of the ZVZD-1 includes that employers shall protect employees from violence, mobbing, harassment, and psychosocial risks.

## Collective agreements and Social Partner initiatives

Alongside laws, **social dialogue at national and sectoral level** has led to important agreements to improve psychosocial conditions for educators. In many countries, teacher unions and education employers (or national education social partners) have negotiated contracts or pacts that include provisions on workload, mental health support, and violence prevention. Notably:

- In **the Netherlands**, continuous social dialogue since 2018 over teacher workload culminated in a significant investment through the 2022 Education Agreement. The Dutch government, partnering with unions, allocated an extra €300 million per year from 2022/23 onward specifically "voor de verlichting van werkdruk" (for relieving work pressure) in primary and secondary education. Schools have used these funds – which were secured in collective bargaining – to hire additional teaching assistants, reduce class sizes, or give teachers more prep time, directly tackling one of the biggest stressors (overwork). The Dutch approach pairs a concrete resource commitment with local autonomy (each school's team, including teacher representatives, decides how to spend its workload relief budget). Early evaluations suggest this has helped lower reported stress in schools that added support staff or adjusted timetables.
- In **Germany,** while formal collective bargaining for public school teachers happens at the Federal level, there have been framework agreements and joint initiatives to address psychosocial strain. The Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK) in 2018 issued guidelines on "No Violence Against Teachers," leading Federal States like **Bavaria** and **Lower Saxony** to set up support systems (including reporting mechanisms and counselling for teacher victims of violence). By 2020, the teachers' union GEW reported that most German Federal States had at least some form of protocol or agreement in place for handling threats or assaults on school staff (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus, 2024).
- In **Finland**, while industrial relations in education are consensus-driven, the teachers' union OAJ has successfully bargained for conditions that foster wellbeing. A notable example is the contractual provision of "yhteissuunnittelu" time – a set amount of working time allocated for collaborative planning among teachers. Under OAJ's collective agreements with education employers, Finnish primary and secondary teachers get up to 2 hours per week (approx. 80–120 hours/year) of their working time specifically for joint planning and sharing of workload with colleagues. This initiative, in place for some years and reinforced in recent teacher contracts, has been praised for reducing isolation and distributing tasks (e.g., co-creating lesson plans) so that no teacher is overwhelmed alone. Research suggests that such collegial support time improves job satisfaction and reduces stress in Finnish schools (Ahonen et al., 2024). Amid the pandemic, OAJ and education employers also negotiated additional wellbeing support: for example, extra funding for counselling services for teachers and a guarantee that teachers could not be forced to use personal devices or be available at all hours for remote teaching (linking back to the right to disconnect).

- In the **United Kingdom**, social dialogue led to the creation of the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter in 2021. This charter – endorsed by the Department for Education in England along with all major teaching unions and employer associations – is a public commitment to prioritize mental health and work-life balance for school staff. It contains 12 pledges by employers and 5 by the government and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, such as: monitoring staff workload, giving staff a voice in decisions, addressing bullying and harassment, and providing access to wellbeing resources. Although voluntary, over 2,000 schools and colleges signed up in its first year, and it has raised the profile of psychosocial welfare in the education sector. The UK charter is accompanied by practical Wellbeing Resources (developed with input from mental health charities) and an annual survey to track progress.

## Targeted initiatives and Good Practices

Many national examples illustrate creative approaches to specific psychosocial challenges in education:

- In **Belgium**, the *Voel je goed op het werk* (Feel good at work) initiative by the Belgian knowledge centre on wellbeing at work (*Belgisch kenniscentrum over welzijn op het werk*). This is a federal programme that focuses on preventing and managing psychosocial risks at work by providing tools to managers, employee representatives, and welfare specialists (Beswic, n.d.). However, Belgian participants in the projects' training seminar noted that, despite widespread awareness of PSRs, it is still challenging to secure the necessary support for initiatives like *voel je goed op het werk*, partly due to limited coordination between legislation and related initiatives.
- In April 2020, the national television (RTP Memória) in **Portugal** launched a programme called #EstudoEmCasa (Studying at Home) on which Portuguese teachers could rely to support their teaching activities during the period of school closures. This initiative was launched to reduce the pressure on teachers of pupils in elementary education (children between 6 and 15 years old) and also support pupils without internet access or digital tools essential to access distance learning (Flores & Gago, 2020).
- In 2024, in **Portugal**, SIPE (Sindicato Independente de Professores e Educatores) relaunched the platforms "*Violence in Schools—Zero Tolerance*" ("Violência nas Escolas—Tolerância ZERO") to combat violence against teachers. The platform offers teachers a safe and confidential channel to report cases of physical and verbal aggression, bullying, recurrent indiscipline, and other situations of violence in the school environment.
- Similarly, **Ireland**'s Department of Education worked with teacher unions to update the "Action Plan on Bullying" in schools (2022) to cover bullying of teachers by students or parents, not only student-to-student bullying. All schools in Ireland must now have a policy that addresses harassment of staff, and boards of management are accountable for ensuring a safe psychosocial environment for teachers, with periodic surveys of teacher wellbeing (a non-legislative but mandatory measure through departmental circulars).

For instance, **Luxembourg** in 2022 created a dedicated psychological support unit for teachers (Service de soutien psycho-social pour le personnel enseignant) providing free counseling and burnout prevention workshops – an initiative championed by the teachers' union and funded by the Ministry of Education.

Across all these national measures, a common thread is the role of **social dialogue and collective action** in driving progress. Even when a measure is legislative, it often comes about due to union advocacy or joint campaigns. Non-legislative initiatives, from charters to funding accords, almost invariably involve negotiations or cooperation between education employers and unions. This reflects the understanding that psychosocial wellbeing in education is multidimensional – it concerns workload (often tied to funding and staffing), work organisation, management culture, and external factors like parent behaviour – and thus, solutions require buy-in from both employer and employee side.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Implementation gaps are a concern – having laws or agreements on paper is only a first step in addressing psychosocial risks. Under-resourcing is another challenge and without sufficient funding and staffing, measures like workload reduction or dedicated wellbeing staff in schools are hard to sustain. Many countries face teacher shortages, which increase the workload for remaining staff. Another challenge is ensuring all levels of education benefit from targeted support. Early childhood education staff, for instance, often have less visibility but are under high stress (dealing with young children and parents).

As policymakers, unions, and employer representatives look ahead, it is important to maintain momentum, ensure effective implementation of mitigation and prevention measures, and address emerging issues (such as digital-era stress and post-pandemic recovery) so that all education personnel across Europe can enjoy safe and supportive working conditions.

# 4. Conclusions

In this report, we examined the literature on working conditions, psychosocial risks, and the prevalence of mental health issues in the education sector before and after the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, we analysed survey responses of education representatives to understand how they perceive the state of play of psychosocial risks in the sector après-COVID. The cumulative evidence suggests that most aspects of working conditions in the education sector in Europe have, to some extent, been strained prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. However, the COVID-19 crisis has evidently intensified those challenges in the education sector, with educators at greater risk of exposure to and negative impact of psychosocial risks.

# Key findings:

- **Working time and work-life balance** issues generally intensified during the COVID-19 crisis as the sudden shift to remote teaching further blurred the line between professional and personal life. Notably, the difficulty of disconnecting from work that educators continue to experience today is not primarily a consequence of COVID-19, and its lasting impact on the work environment. Rather, the ubiquitousness of constant connectivity in all parts of life reflects an ongoing shift on a societal level – an evolution that may have been made more apparent during the crisis, but certainly was not the primary cause of it.
- Despite the technological progress on a societal level, not all educational institutions and educators were adequately prepared for the **rapid digitalisation** of the sector, though many were already progressing toward it at varying pace before the COVID-19 crisis. Many educators learned new technologies virtually overnight, with such pressures leading to increased workloads and heightened stress levels among education professionals, generally amplifying pre-existing psychosocial risks. COVID-19 acted as a stress test that magnified questions related to workload intensity, work-life balance, and technological gaps that had been latent or insufficiently addressed previously. Importantly, the **improved digitalisation** of the sector is often cited as one of the **key positive outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis**. Many educators continue to use the technologies and tools adopted during the pandemic to increase their work efficiency and streamline communication in their daily work to this day.
- Changes in working conditions driven by the COVID-19 crisis have impacted educators' **mental health**. Both scientific and anecdotal evidence from across Europe supports the notion that stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout among education professionals have increased during the COVID-19 crisis and since. It has been reported that exhaustion and mental strain have to some extent increased, reflecting how the crisis piled additional psychosocial demands onto an already demanding job. However, concerns about work-related mental health issues in the education sector predate COVID-19, though they received comparatively less public attention. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis intensified these underlying problems versus bringing them to the forefront and prompting more open discussion and reporting.
- High workloads, long working hours and chronic stress are commonly cited problems in the sector and have likely contributed to a **growing teacher shortage**. The crisis' impact has pushed some educators to leave the profession or retire early, and has, in some cases, discouraged potential new teachers from entering the field. The global crisis placed immense pressure on the education sector, however, education systems in Europe have been under multiple sources of pressure for some time. This reality is reflected in Europe-wide teacher shortages, with 24 out of 27 European Union (EU) Member States reporting significant staff shortages.

- Crucially, the factors driving this shortage extend beyond workload and stress alone. **Low to moderate financial compensation** for often highly qualified professionals, **resource constraints**, and **limited diversification of the career progression** have weakened the attractiveness of teaching careers. The result is a vicious cycle in which challenging and complex working conditions and modest pay fuel staff shortages, and these, in turn, exacerbate those working conditions for the remaining staff. High workloads and compromised work-life balance is now recognised as central issues impeding the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers across Europe.

The broader implications of these findings raise questions about the long-term sustainability of a high-quality profession in education across Europe. If challenges related to strained working conditions are not systematically addressed, there is a risk of lasting damage to the quality and continuity of education. A shortage of teachers also threatens to undermine student learning outcomes, increase class sizes, and place greater pressure on the educators who remain. In a scenario where the profession cannot attract new talent or retain experienced teachers, education systems could enter a downward spiral – overworked staff become less effective and more prone to illness or attrition, which, in turn, further burdens remaining teachers.

It is also a reminder that the issues underlined by COVID-19 are not entirely new problems arising from the COVID-19 crisis, but also structural weaknesses that the crisis has laid bare. Issues related to underinvestment, workload intensification, and varying adequacy of support for educators predated COVID-19. As a result of the crisis, however, we can now see more clearly that working conditions and mental health are inseparable from the quality of education. The wellbeing and commitment of educators are the basis for the success of students and the resilience of whole educational systems, and the strength of societies. Therefore, safeguarding the psychosocial health of education professionals is not just a matter of worker welfare.

As seen from the survey evidence, education social partners are acutely aware of the challenges impacting working conditions in education and the wellbeing of education professionals at all levels, and they are actively and successfully working towards addressing them. Social partners are well placed to engage in social dialogue, highlight the most pressing challenges, and influence policy decisions at institutional and governmental levels. They also serve as advocates and, as such, they can draw attention to mental health concerns, work-life balance issues, and psychosocial risks affecting educators, thus promoting greater awareness and continued action. Indeed, addressing the complex and often deeply intertwined challenges will require bold, coordinated action, and above all, a strong commitment to increased investment in the education sector across Europe.

It is true that a profession in the education sector has always been intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically demanding, as well as immensely rewarding work. This is because working in education means being an expert in one's field and possessing the right qualities - being nurturing, empathetic, compassionate, curious, and a lifelong learner. With the rising demands and expectations of educators and educational institutions, there should be greater demands

for support and investment in their workplace wellbeing. As such, maintaining and enhancing the psychosocial wellbeing in the education sector should be regarded as a strategic priority for policymakers and the broader educational community.

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# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| **Anxiety** | Anxiety is characterised by feelings of worry, fear, or unease that can be mild or severe. When persistent or overwhelming, it can significantly interfere with daily life and may manifest as physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, restlessness and difficulty concentrating. |
| **Burnout** | Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, which manifests in three primary dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalisation, and a diminished sense of personal and professional efficacy. |
| **Depression** | Depression is a mental health disorder characterised by persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in activities, and emotional or physical symptoms that interfere with daily life. It can negatively affect a person's thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and physical wellbeing and, in severe cases, can lead to suicidal ideation. |
| **Digitalisation** | The broad adoption of digital technologies and digitised data facilitated by laptops, smartphones, other resources and tools, and digital infrastructure. |
| **Emotional Labour** | The effort, planning and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions. |
| **Hybrid teaching** | The classroom is connected both on-site students and remote students during synchronous lessons from a teacher. The teacher is usually in the physical classroom. |
| **Initial teacher Training** | Mandatory training that provides prospective teachers with core professional competences and to develop the attitudes needed for their future role and responsibilities. |

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|---|---|
| **Job control** | The extent to which an employee can exercise professional autonomy and influence how they do their work. |
| **Mental Health** | A state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. |
| **Online teaching** | Teaching where both the teacher and student is connected online, usually from a home setting. Online teaching can be done in-sync or recorded for students to watch in their own time. |
| **Psychosocial risks** | "Psychosocial risks are aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organisational contexts, that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm". |
| **Stress** | Stress itself arises from a perceived lack of control and support, resulting in a negative psychological state characterised by impact on both cognitive and emotional components. |
| **Technostress** | Stress caused by ICT use, driven by techno-overload, techno-invasion, and an increase in workload and stress. |
| **Wellbeing** | Wellbeing is a multifaceted construct that draws on various social, economic, psychological, cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions. |
| **Working conditions** | Working time, workload, pressure at work, and available support and resources |
| **Working time** | Working time reflects the number of hours worked (both paid and unpaid) and is directly impacted by factors such as workload, intensity of work, and even the ability to disconnect from work-related duties. |
| **Work-life balance** | The division of one's time and focus between working time and time for family, friends, or leisure activities. Workers have the right to disconnect from work and enjoy genuine downtime. |

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ACSH | Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work |
| ADHD | Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder |
| CPD | Continuous Professional Development |
| EACEA | European Education and Culture Executive Agency |
| EC | European Commission |
| ECEC | Early Childhood Education and Care |
| EFEE | European Federation of Education Employers |
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area |
| ESP | Education Support Personnel |
| ETUCE | European Trade Union Committee for Education |
| EU | European Union |
| EU-OSHA | European Agency for Safety and Health |
| EUR | Euro |
| ERI | Effort-Reward Imbalance |
| ESSDE | European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| ICTs | Information and Communication Technology(-ies) |
| ITE | Initial Teacher Education |
| JD-R | Job Demands-Resources (model) |
| LSA | Learning and Support Assistant |
| MS | Member State |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| OSH | Occupational Safety and Health |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |
| TALIS | Teaching and Learning International Survey |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |

# Endnotes

1 The role of business liaison in higher education institutions refers to a professional support role that facilitates strategic interaction between academia and the business world, fostering collaboration, innovation, and knowledge transfer. Business liaisons operate at the intersection of academic and commercial interests, aligning institutional goals with external partnerships (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017).

2 Law amending Articles 14, 25, 27, 30, 52, 58, 139, 144, 221, 222, 223, 225, 226, 227 and 240 of the Labor Code.

# APRES COVID