



**Contribution to the open public consultation
on the European Education Area (EEA) interim evaluation**
by the Commission on Culture and Education of the
Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)

The [Commission on Culture and Education](#) of [COMECE](#) (Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union) submits the following contribution to the interim evaluation of the European Education Area, as part of its mission of dialogue in the context of Art. 17 TFUE.

The education of young people is paramount for our societies. Most importantly, education contributes to the full development and fulfilment of the human person, making each person aware of their dignity and talents. At later stages of life, lifelong learning is critical to expand one's skillset and knowledge and better contribute to the Common Good.

Today, education is confronted with challenges that impact the whole of society: parents, learners and teachers. Although all actors in the educational context are of importance, teachers are essential to provide knowledge, competences and life experiences to the younger generations. We are dependent on their contribution and efforts as society, culture and civilisation. According to the latest [2023 Education and Training Monitor](#), EU Member States are reporting teacher shortages, an issue that has dire consequences on many dimensions of education and on the social fabric of regions and local communities.

Because of the central role of teachers in the educational ecosystem and the latest focus of the *2023 Education and training monitor*, the COMECE Commission on Culture and Education is contributing to the interim evaluation of the EEA by focusing on the challenges affecting teaching staff in the European union, taking it as a particular angle to interpret some of the major issues at stake for education today. The Catholic Church, strong for its educational tradition through basic and secondary schools, institutes and universities, offers a major contribution and public service through **value-based** and **purpose-driven** learning and teaching - essential for the future and mission of the European Union.

1. Teaching as a vocational career

Teaching is by nature a future-oriented profession. The mission of teachers and trainers to accompany young people in their path to adulthood and fulfilment, as well

as that of educators at later stages of life when it comes to continuous learning, contributes to the human dimension of the Common Good. As any profession is understood in a more integral and holistic perspective as a **vocation or calling**, so is teaching. When the decision to teach is not only dictated by economic reasons, then the transmission of knowledge, competences and life experiences becomes a mission to shape purposeful and mature generations of adults - a meaningful '**public service**'. As defined by Pope Francis in his *Global Compact on Education*, integral education goes beyond the transmission of knowledge¹: "One cannot educate without walking alongside the people being educated. [...] Educating is not saying purely rhetorical things; educating is making what is said meet reality. [...] The true educator is not frightened by mistakes, no: he or she accompanies, takes one by the hand, listens, dialogues. [An educator] doesn't get scared and waits. This is the *human* education". The quality of the relationship with pupils is equally important to the preparation and competences of the teacher, who does not operate in a one-way transmission logic, but prefers a "dialogical exchange' that is educational for both sides.²

The vocational dimension of teaching, however, should not be interpreted as a justification to consider the profession differently from other careers. **Salaries** play a great role in the attractiveness and the overall motivation of teachers to commit to their mission as educators.³ Decreasing salaries of half OECD members between 2015 and 2022 in secondary levels constitutes a deterrent factor for aspiring EU teachers.⁴ According to the Council Conclusions in 2020, it is necessary to promote **sustainable, efficient and effective investment** in teachers and trainers, including measures directed towards salaries.⁵ In the equation, all educational actors should be taken into account: both public and private institutions (faith-based or secular) provide a public service to society. **Equality** in salaries in **both public and private schools** should be ensured in order to promote quality teaching. Retribution should also be linked to competences and formation, not only to experience.

¹ Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: "Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond", 15 October 2020, retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html

² Global Compact on Education, *Instrumentum laboris*, retrieved from: <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/instrumentum-laboris-en.pdf>

³ European Commission (Eurydice), *Teachers' and school heads' salaries and allowances in Europe - 2021/2022*, retrieved from: <https://eurymice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/teachers-and-school-heads-salaries-and-allowances-europe-20212022>

⁴ According to the latest [EU Education and Training monitor](#), compared to other tertiary-educated workers, salaries of teachers are 10.5% lower. Between 2015 and 2022, salaries of secondary schools teachers with more than 15 years of experience sank in half of OECD countries. As an example, in Italy the decrease of real salaries has touched 4%, and, in general, average teachers' salaries correspond to 69% of those of workers with the same education level, making the teaching profession less attractive for young people. For more information: <https://data.oecd.org/teachers/teachers-salaries.htm>

⁵ Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future, 2020/C 193/04

Recommendations

To EU Member States

1. **Increase public expenditure** ([reversing the downward trend in the EU](#)) and offer wider career opportunities to teachers, ensuring that training experiences are recognised and met with corresponding salary increases
2. Establish better funding of Education in private schools, ensuring that teachers are equally paid in both systems, i.e. State and private sector
3. **Build effective strategies to promote the teaching profession**, particularly in special schools and for special education teachers

To EU institutions

4. When issuing policies concerning education and training, **stress the vocational role of teachers and trainers** in accompanying pupils towards their fulfilment, and the task to communicate values and life experiences to learners beyond knowledge and skills
5. Show the contribution of private schools with diverse missions, values and visions (e.g. of Catholic schools and formation institutes) to society and democracy

2. Training, recruitment and retention

Training, recruitment and retention policies vary greatly across the EU. In many cases, however, these three areas face similar challenges and are deeply intertwined. Their qualitative improvement can result in quality education for all.

First, **training** opportunities are still unavailable to many teachers, also considering the workload generated by bureaucratic procedures, which take away time for professional development. Lack of access to training and work overload might make it necessary to recruit additional staff (causing a vicious circle) and lead to the overall decline of job prestige – only 17% of teachers deem their profession valued at EU level.⁶ Moreover, teacher training and skills acquisition are not valued enough by recruiters or school systems, with resulting disinterest among young generations of aspiring teachers. In addition, oftentimes upskilling opportunities are limited to specific training and skills, which do not foster the teachers' pedagogical and **care-oriented mission** vis-a-vis pupils. Catholic schools usually try to establish networks of cooperation for continuous learning (see positive examples in Catholic schools in Croatia, Portugal and Italy⁷). However, lack of financial resources and involvement of public administration poses obstacles to their functioning.

Second, **recruitment** procedures often fail to consider the integral formation that candidate teachers need before entering the school ecosystem. In addition to technical

⁶ See [2023 Education and Training Monitor](#)

⁷ European Committee for Catholic Education, Training of teachers and headteachers in Catholic education in Europe: a contribution of the European committee for Catholic education, to be retrieved at: <http://www.ceec.be/>

and communication skills and subject knowledge, teachers should also possess a strong profile in the **vocational, aspirational and motivational dimensions** of the profession. For example, in 2017 the Spanish region of Catalonia introduced a Personal Aptitude Test as condition to access the Education and Pedagogy faculties. However, students who failed the exam could not pursue their studies and took other career choices, notwithstanding their desire to become teachers. The system, therefore, is now being revised and the test is carried out in the first year of studies, allowing students to improve their attitudinal skills and offering them more inclusive educational opportunities.⁸ Recruitment is also facilitated by solid **apprenticeship schemes**, which allow applicants without formal education in pedagogy to undergo training and enter the recruiting process with their newly acquired competences, setting them on a level playing field with the traditional pathways to the profession. **The demographic crisis across the EU and ageing teaching workforce** are, both in the short and long term, detrimental to the solidity of education systems, with effects expected to worsen the quality of education and teachers' employment in the coming years.⁹

Third, **retention** proves to be difficult in many Member States due to a series of challenges correlated to salaries (see above), but also to the **attractiveness of the teaching career** and the lack of career prospects. Further progression in management positions in the school setting – e.g. becoming school head or coordinator – are not particularly attractive to teachers in many EU countries due to growing administrative and bureaucratic procedures that come at the expense of teaching time.¹⁰ Introducing **initiatives for mobility** (e.g. through the [Erasmus+ Teacher Academies](#) or other programmes) and reward-based solutions might increase the attractiveness of the profession and its recognition as a valuable career. Lack of integrated and well-structured programmes of continuous learning after recruitment - for both public and private institutions - also questions the validity and attractiveness of the teaching profession, especially for newly recruited teachers. In addition, **lifelong learning** through non-formal education should be strengthened, also for teachers over 64 years of age.

Recommendations

To EU Member States

- Guarantee that **different paths to the teaching profession** are not discriminated against, but encouraged through necessary quality checks, for the sake of more participated recruitment procedures

⁸ Celebramos el nuevo acuerdo del sistema universitario catalán alrededor de las PAP de educación, to be retrieved at: <https://www.blanquerna.edu/es/noticias/celebramos-el-nuevo-acuerdo-del-sistema-universitario-catalan-alrededor-de-las-pap-de>

⁹ In Italy, for instance, 61% of teachers is older than 50 and the average age of teachers is of 50,2 years, with slightly younger teachers in VET institutes than in other types of secondary schools (see OECD *Education at a Glance* report here: <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>)

¹⁰ Cf. footnote 7

- Ensure that schools and teachers are sufficiently encouraged to participate in lifelong learning and career development at all levels of education
- Establish **mechanisms of micro-credentials** to allow aspiring teachers to access the school system independently from their educational background
- Make sure that EU initiatives such as [eTwinning](#) are sufficiently known by both public and private schools, especially by institutions struggling with the set-up of programmes of lifelong and continuous learning for teachers and administrative staff
- Aim to **provide incentives for salary equality** between private and public education institutions, especially in countries without legal provisions or agreement between the Church and State¹¹

To EU institutions

- **Collect data** on the participation of teachers from marginalised and rural schools in Erasmus+ Teachers Academies and ensure that EU-wide programmes for teachers' mobility are sufficiently inclusive for educators from disadvantaged backgrounds and schools
- Invest in EU-wide tools for the **comparative analysis** of data concerning recruitment and retention rates
- Ensure that cohesion and regional funds always consider the educational dimension to avoid “**teacher brain drain**” affecting isolated areas and address the depopulation of rural communities

3. Further challenges for teachers in the school ecosystem

In addition to the issues above, other equally important challenges affect the role of teachers in the EU. On the national level, **cooperation between families and schools** is worsening : from simple absence from school dynamics to violence towards teachers (e.g. in Italy¹²). Distance between families and school staff is detrimental to quality of education and motivation of learners to attend school. Oftentimes, the school is understood as a mere “service provider”, hence shaping a customer-client relationship that negatively impacts on dialogue and co-creation. The partnership between parents and schools must be nurtured for the benefit of children and pupils and of social cohesion, especially for young learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.¹³

¹¹ In Malta, for instance, salary inequality between Catholic and public schools is not present, due to the 1991 Concordate between the Holy See and Malta

¹² Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/valditara-stop-a-episodi-di-violenza-nelle-scuole-docenti-e-personale-saranno-difesi-da-avvocatura-dello-stato-> and cf. data from Eurispes, stating that 1 in 10 teachers has been victim of violence from pupils' parents, retrieved from: <https://eurispes.eu/news/2-rapporto-sulla-scuola-e-luniversita-i-risultati/>

¹³ In Malta, Church schools provide a community-based school climate founded on the particular school charism and mission. This ‘home away from home’ environment is welcome by staff members as they see it as crucial to the holistic development of children who may not have such a nurturing environment at their own homes. Various school leadership teams prioritize the mental well-being of their staff and provide the space where their needs and challenges can be

Digitalisation also affects the work of teachers, as it may add complexity to their mission and tasks, if not supported by the right training on methodologies and practical use. As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of digital technologies in the classroom has risen exponentially. However, such development has not been equal throughout Europe, especially considering the nature of school financing and the socio-economic status of families who cannot afford purchasing digital tools for the education of their children.

Shortage of teachers vary between Member States. However, some subjects related to **basic skills** are more prone to lack teachers than others. For instance, Catholic schools in Portugal, the Netherlands and Belgium report shortages in Mathematics, Science and Languages. Such trend can worsen the vicious cycle of underachievement pointed by the latest [PISA 2022](#) report, which highlighted the decline in these skills by young learners across the EU. Deeply concerning shortages in teachers do not allow pupils to linearly progress in their competences and knowledge due to disrupted educational cycles, overcrowded classrooms and the absence of stable educators. Such developments may question the increasingly skills-oriented and competence-based curricula implemented by some contemporary national educational reforms.

Religion teachers are also increasingly scarcer across the EU. In most instances, the role of **religious education** and **Religion teachers** is underestimated. However, with their work, Religion teachers put humanity and human dignity at the centre of the learning experience. They make students aware of the different Christian denominations and world religions, as also of the secularist philosophies that shape contemporary culture. Moreover, they care for **emotional and spiritual development**, which impact the mental and physical well-being of pupils. Oftentimes, they also have a mediation role in schools and contribute greatly to **fostering religious literacy** in times of increasingly multicultural and secularised societies. In their curricula, they encourage interdisciplinary, real-life teaching imbued with values and moral skills, making education a truly holistic endeavour.

Recommendations

To EU Member States

- Put forward education policies creating a **balance** between digital and in-class education, fostering formation programmes for teachers to familiarise themselves with and later implement the best use of technologies for pedagogical purposes
- Encourage the creation of initiatives for **stronger cooperation between families and teachers**, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, including faith-based organisations and actors
- **Promote the role of Religion teachers**, ensuring that their profession is not seen as second-class and that their mission is acknowledged by public school systems

explored usually through the school chaplain and other key persons with a strong spiritual formation. Many Catholic church schools also offer ongoing spiritual formation to staff members, some through structured programmes, others adopting a continuous approach throughout the year.

To EU institutions

- Acknowledge the worsening underachievement in basic skills across the EU-27 and implement strategies for the **exchange on good practices** among national ministries, focusing on the quality of training and the promotion of the teaching career in lacking subjects
- Support a higher visibility of religious literacy and Religion teachers in educational policies