Education for social change: the role of education trade unions in addressing sustainable environmental development

Summary report, April 2022

PPMi

Introduction: Study context and focus

The European Green Deal and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight that education and training are crucial to transition to environmental sustainability. Education has an essential role to play by instilling the competences needed to find solutions, change consumption models and transform society towards a more sustainable way of living. This responsibility is emphasized in the EU's council conclusions on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)[1], the proposal for a council recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability[2] and in ETUCE's resolution on the sustainable future of Europe[3] and position paper on the latest proposal for a council recommendation[4].

When education is recognised with an increasingly important role in ensuring the societal 'green transitions', the role of and demand towards teachers, academics and other education personnel increase equally. Thus, recently, several studies at both the global, EU and national levels studies have focused on teachers, academics and other education personnel' awareness of and perception of this trend and how to support them in implementing education for environmental sustainability.[5][6] UNESCO and EI's global study found that in Europe common challenges teachers, academics and other education personnel faced when implementing ESD were few resources (content, material or guidelines) and, particularly in rural schools, insufficient support to teachers.[7]

Education trade unions are instrumental in ensuring that teachers have a say in the process of transitioning to education for sustainable environmental development and are supported, prepared and motivated to promote deep learning and skill development on topics related to sustainable environmental development. Thus, the ETUCE project "Education for Social Change: The role of Education Trade Unions in addressing sustainable environmental development" aims at building the capacity of education trade unions to prepare their affiliates to address environmental questions and climate emergency for sustainable development in education and training through social dialogue and collective bargaining in Europe. Here the objective is to both address the impact that environmental sustainability measures and climate emergency have on the employees and their working conditions as well as the impact it has on education and education priorities.

During this project, ETUCE contracted PPMI to research and develop, with the input from the project advisory group, research questions to be addressed to ETUCE member organisations through an online survey. The survey focused on the impact of the climate emergency on working conditions and on

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[1] Council of the European Union (2010) Council conclusions on education for sustainable development. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/117855.pdf

[2] European Commission (2022) Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on learning for environmental sustainability, COM/2022/11 Final.

[3] ETUCE (2021) Resolution: For a sustainable future of Europe: the role of education trade unions in Europe in addressing education and environment for social change. Adopted by the ETUCE conference, the Regional Conference of Education International, 5-6 July 2021.

[4] ETUCE (2021) Position on the "Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Education for Environmental Sustainability. Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 15-16 November 2021.

[5] Epinion (2021) Undervisning i bæredygtighed på grundskoleområdet. Available at: https://ungdomsbyen.dk/vare/undervisning-i-baeredygtighed-paa-grundskoleomraadet/

[6] Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M., GreenComp The European sustainability competence framework, Punie, Y. and Bacigalupo, M. editor(s), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-46485-3, doi:10.2760/13286, JRC128040.

[7] Mulvik, I.B., Pribuišis, K., Siarova, H., Sabaliauskas, E., Gaudelli, W. and M. Yemini. (2021) Teachers have their say: Motivation, skills and opportunities to teach education for sustainable development and global citizenship. *UNESCO and Education International.* Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379914

education and trade union policies, including the provision of equal access to quality education for all and integration of education on environmental, climatic and sustainable development issues. In parallel, PPMI carried out a literature review to identify environmental or education-related challenges faced by the education sector and education workers in different national and local contexts in Europe and to better understand how education trade unions are currently experiencing and addressing those challenges. The results of the survey and the related desk research are synthesised in this research report and will inform ETUCE's actions on policy and social dialogue for sustainable environmental development.

The study consisted of a literature review and an online survey. The report presents findings stemming from the analysis of the collected secondary data and the survey to answer the research questions presented in **Table 1.**

TABLE 1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1	What challenges do professionals in the education sector face due to changes in the environment?
2	What impact do sustainable development measures implemented in educational institutions have on education professionals?
3	How do the challenges professionals in the education sector face differ by national and local context, gender, and other key background factors?
4	What are practices of education trade unions, especially concerning social dialogue, that support and build the capacity of their affiliates to address environmental sustainability issues?

The literature review aimed to document existing evidence on addressing environmental issues and sustainable development and its impact on workers in the education sector to better understand the challenges faced by education personnel and unions alike. Education personnel covered all school levels from primary school to higher education. A secondary objective was to collect good practices, measures and tools education trade unions can implement to foster sustainability in education.

The online survey aimed to better understand the perspective of unions and the education personnel they represented towards sustainable environmental development issues. The survey targeted representatives of ETUCE member organisations and asked them about the impact of environmental sustainability issues on their practices and on trade union members, trade union members' experience with implementing education for environmental sustainability, professional development needs of trade union members, trade union's policies on addressing environmental sustainability in education and practices on social dialogue for environmental sustainability.

This study relied primarily on insights from a non-representative online survey with representatives of ETUCE member organisations that ran from September 20 to December 16, 2021. 44 ETUCE member organisations representing 30 countries and all school levels across Europe participated. The study identified four major areas of challenges facing union members either due to the direct threat of climate change or due to the changes and new demands facing teachers, academics and other education personnel during the climate emergency, and three major areas of education trade unions responses and actions to the reported challenges.

Results: Challenges and opportunities

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Increased workload and health problems

Among regions where ETUCE member organisations are based, some areas and subsequently schools are more at risk of climate change hazards than others and face different forms of threats, especially in the countries where a significant share of buildings was built before the first thermal regulations in the 1970s. Yet, respondents report that the most severe impact environmental sustainability issues have on working conditions is on workload, followed by mental and physical health. About one in four respondents state that the impact on workload is very negative. The potentially negative impact of teachers, academics and other education personnel taking a bigger role in creating sustainable learning environments on their overall work capacity has been noted in recent European scholarship.[8] Thus, it is not surprising, that respondents primarily answered that it is challenging to implement education for environmental sustainability (81 per cent).

FIGURE 1. EXTENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES' IMPACT ON EDUCATION PERSONNEL
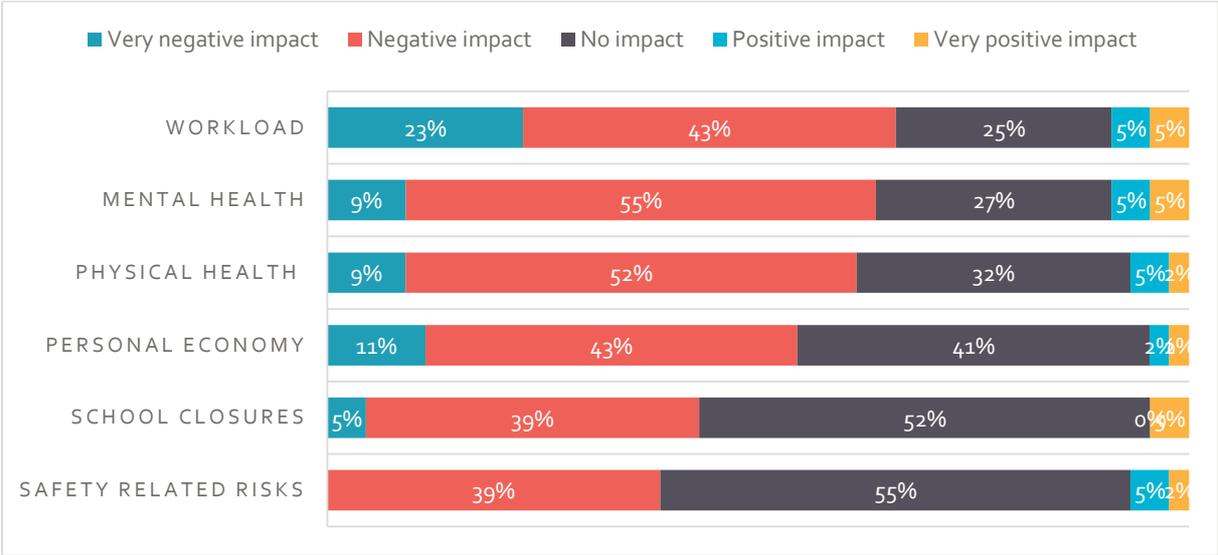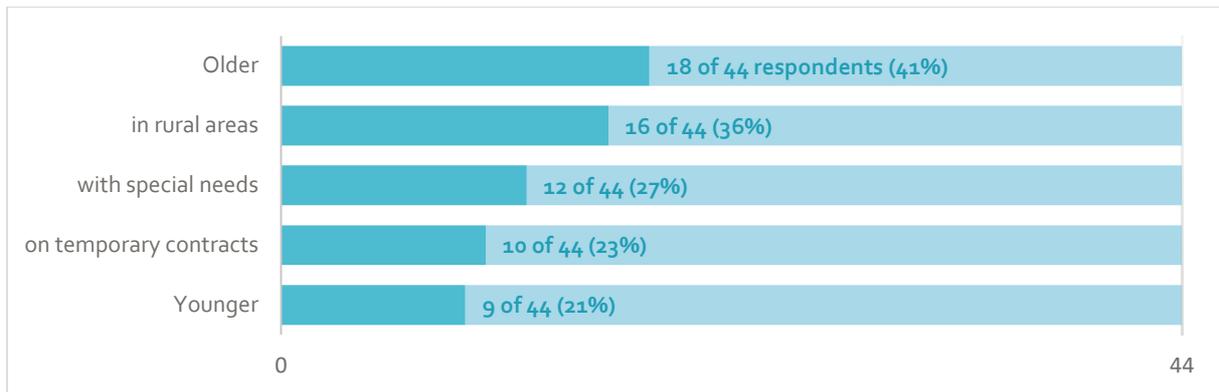

ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 44*

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[8] European Commission (2022) Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, COM 2022. Available at:
https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-staff-working-document-accompanying-the-document-proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-learning-for-environmental-sustainability

However, some education personnel are at risk of injuries and physical traumas also due to the direct impact of climate emergency. When asked to consider groups at risk due to the direct and indirect impact of climate change, respondents reported older rather than younger education personnel, and those in rural rather than in urban areas. In some European countries, these groups, as well as special needs education personnel, are at a disadvantage when facing natural hazards due to their location, working environment and prior conditions.

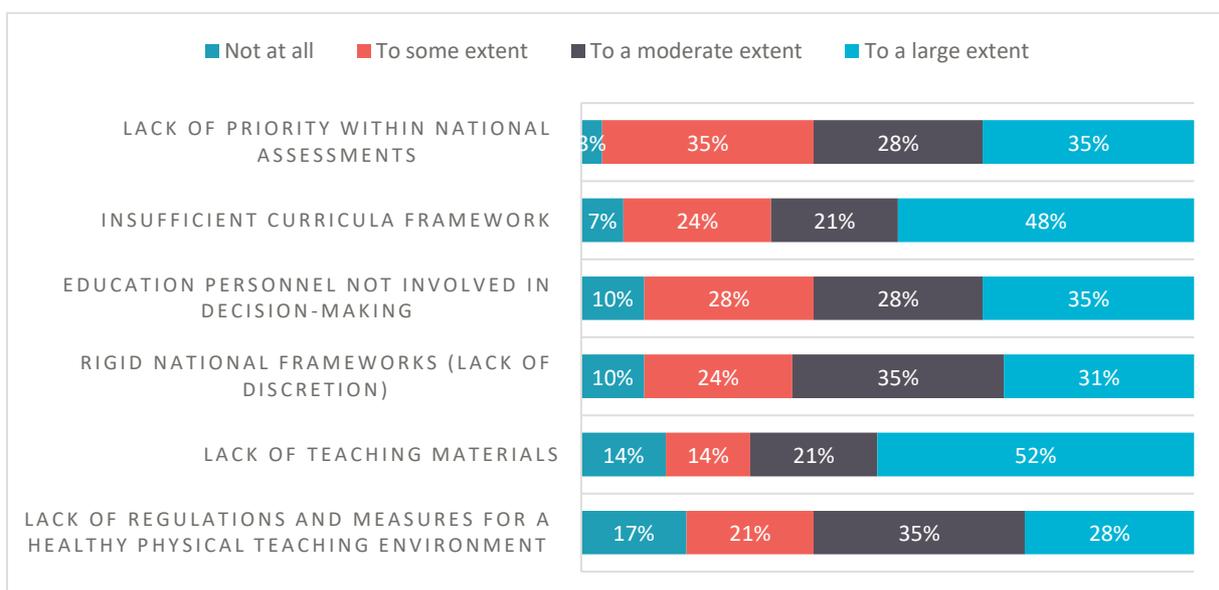**FIGURE 2. VULNERABLE GROUPS OF EDUCATION PERSONNEL**

Older	18 of 44 respondents (41%)
in rural areas	16 of 44 (36%)
with special needs	12 of 44 (27%)
on temporary contracts	10 of 44 (23%)
Younger	9 of 44 (21%)

ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 44*

Insufficient curricula and assessment frameworks

Respondents were most satisfied with the standards in educational institutions with regards to regulations and measures of a healthy working environment, and least satisfied with the lack of common standards for teaching education for environmental sustainability in the curriculum.

FIGURE 3. EXTENT TO WHICH COUNTRY SITUATIONS ARE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Legend: ■ Not at all ■ To some extent ■ To a moderate extent ■ To a large extent

	Not at all	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent
LACK OF PRIORITY WITHIN NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS	3%	35%	28%	35%
INSUFFICIENT CURRICULA FRAMEWORK	7%	24%	21%	48%
EDUCATION PERSONNEL NOT INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING	10%	28%	28%	35%
RIGID NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS (LACK OF DISCRETION)	10%	24%	35%	31%
LACK OF TEACHING MATERIALS	14%	14%	21%	52%
LACK OF REGULATIONS AND MEASURES FOR A HEALTHY PHYSICAL TEACHING ENVIRONMENT	17%	21%	35%	28%

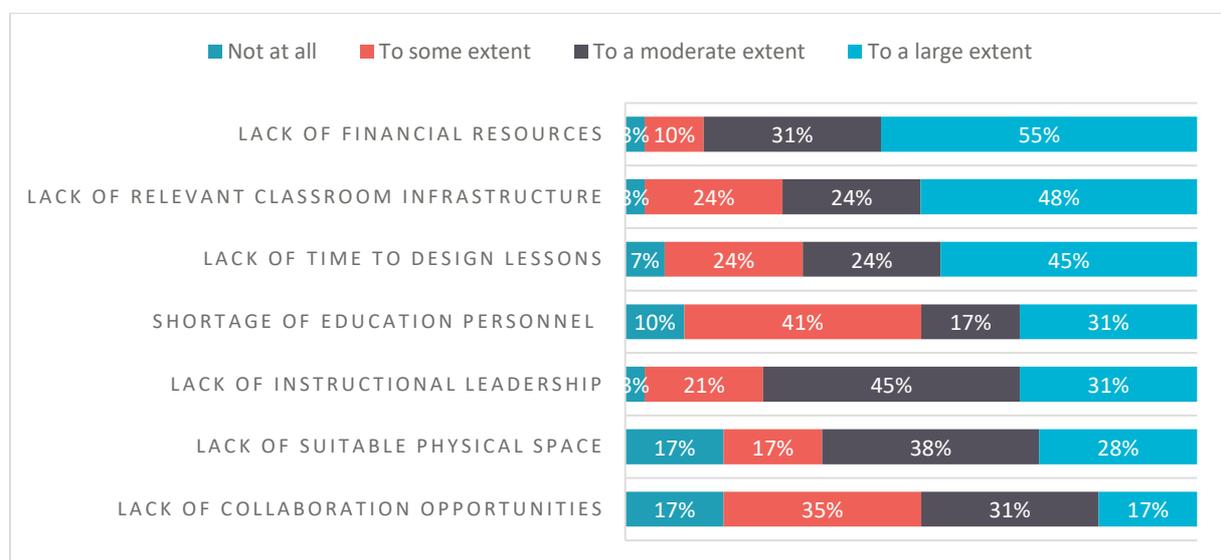ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 29*

The most-reported challenges were lack of priority within national assessments (only 3 per cent reported that this was not a barrier) and insufficient curricula frameworks (only 7 per cent reported that this was not a barrier). Other reported challenges were education personnel to a large extent not being included in the policy decision-making processes in their countries (35 per cent), as well as a lack of discretion within national education frameworks for teachers, academics and other education personnel to apply the curricula as suited to their local context (31 per cent).

Including education for environmental sustainability more comprehensively in the curricula and national assessments would signal its need for prioritization, funding, learning materials and time allocation further down the line. More than half of the respondents reported that there to a large extent is a lack of relevant teaching materials as a result of the lack of curricula and assessment frameworks. It should be noted that there are differences between the ETUCE member organisations participating in the survey and that there has been an increasing push in some countries in the last years to improve curricula frameworks in this regard (e.g., Italy being the first country in the world to make climate change education mandatory in all schools at primary and secondary levels).

Lack of financial resources and good infrastructure at institutions

At the level of education institutions, the most-reported challenge was the lack of financial resources (55 per cent), followed by unfavourable classroom infrastructure (48 per cent). Diminishing public resources makes it harder to free budgets to implement whole-institution initiatives or support teachers, academics and other education personnel.

FIGURE 4. EXTENT TO WHICH SITUATIONS AT INSTITUTIONS ARE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 29*

This is in line with recent mapping study of education for environmental sustainability in Europe[9] as well as a study by the European University Association which confirms this being a major challenge at

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[9] Mulvik, I., Pribuišis, K., Siarova, H., Vežikauskaitė, J., Sabaliauskas, E., Tasiopoulou, E., Gras-Velazquez, A., Bajorinaitė, M., Billon, N., Fronza, V., Disterheft, A. and Finlayson, A. mission (2021) Education for environmental sustainability: policies and approaches in European Union Member States. Final report. Publications Office of the European Unions. DOI: 10.2766/51869

the higher education level too, especially in a context of declining levels of public funding for the higher education sectors in parts of Europe and teacher shortages.[10] Strong and effective leadership is crucial to ensure holistic school approaches and is one enabler to overcoming challenges such as lack of relevant classroom infrastructure and space and attract qualified education personnel, though education leadership cannot act without support and funding.

Need for more accessible and relevant teacher training opportunities

Thematically, education for sustainable environmental development covers a broad range of topics, ranging from climate change (mitigation and adaptation), biodiversity, habitats and homes, ecosystems, water, air and soil quality, forests, to sustainable consumption and production (incl. waste, pollution, transportation), renewable energy resources, disaster risk reduction, food and similar. The themes themselves are interconnected and are thus always encouraged to be approached holistically, not only relating to environmental sustainability but sustainable development itself, at the intersection of engaging pedagogies, learning content and environment.

FIGURE 5. EXTENT TO WHICH SITUATIONS WITH TEACHERS, ACADEMICS AND OTHER EDUCATION PERSONNEL'S EDUCATION ARE BARRIERS TO ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION
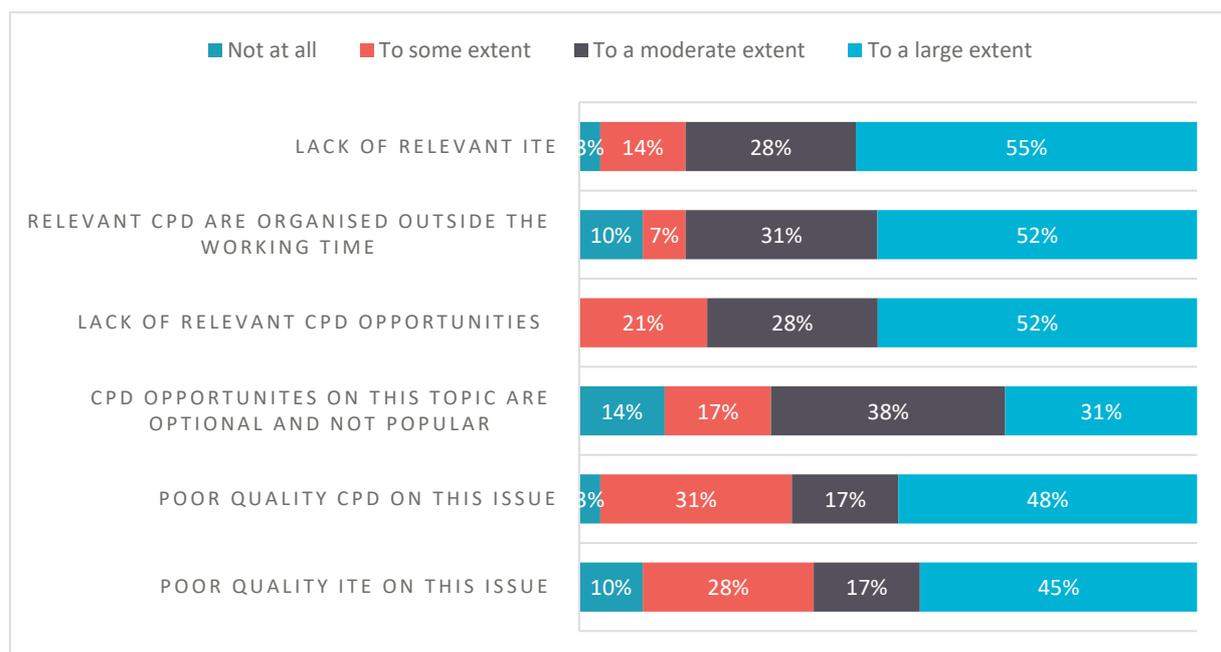
ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 29*

The online survey inquired about the extent to which education personnel's education, in particular teachers and school leaders, could be a barrier to coping with environmental sustainability issues and implementing education for environmental sustainability comprehensively and holistically. Respondents reported most severe challenges were the lack of relevant initial teacher education (ITE), continuous professional development (CPD) being organised outside of the working time and lack of relevant and good quality CPD opportunities. These findings should be read in conjunction with the

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[10] Bunescu, L. and T. Estermann (2021) Greening in European higher education institutions: A governance, funding and efficiency perspective. *European University Alliance.* Available at:
https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/gaf%20greening_final.pdf

prior noted finding that ETUCE member organisations are most concerned about environmental sustainability issues negatively impacting the workload of education personnel. There is a need for more easily available and good quality learning opportunities for teachers, academics and other education personnel. In order for these to be real learning opportunities they need to be scheduled within the working hours to prevent further mental and physical strain on education personnel.

Education Trade Union policies and priorities

With regards to the response from education trade unions, the study discovered that while there has been an increased interest among unions in alleviating these challenges, there is often a focus on traditional thematic areas (e.g., pay, health etc.) rather than revitalized discourse topics and education reform. ETUCE member organisations have moved to more revitalized and diversified approaches when building capacity on environmental sustainability. Yet, developing comprehensive policies on environmental sustainability and support to members, as well as redirecting collective bargaining priorities for this purpose, is less common.

FIGURE 6. EXTENT TO WHICH ETUCE MEMBER ORGANISATIONS ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES IN THEIR POLICIES AND PRIORITIES
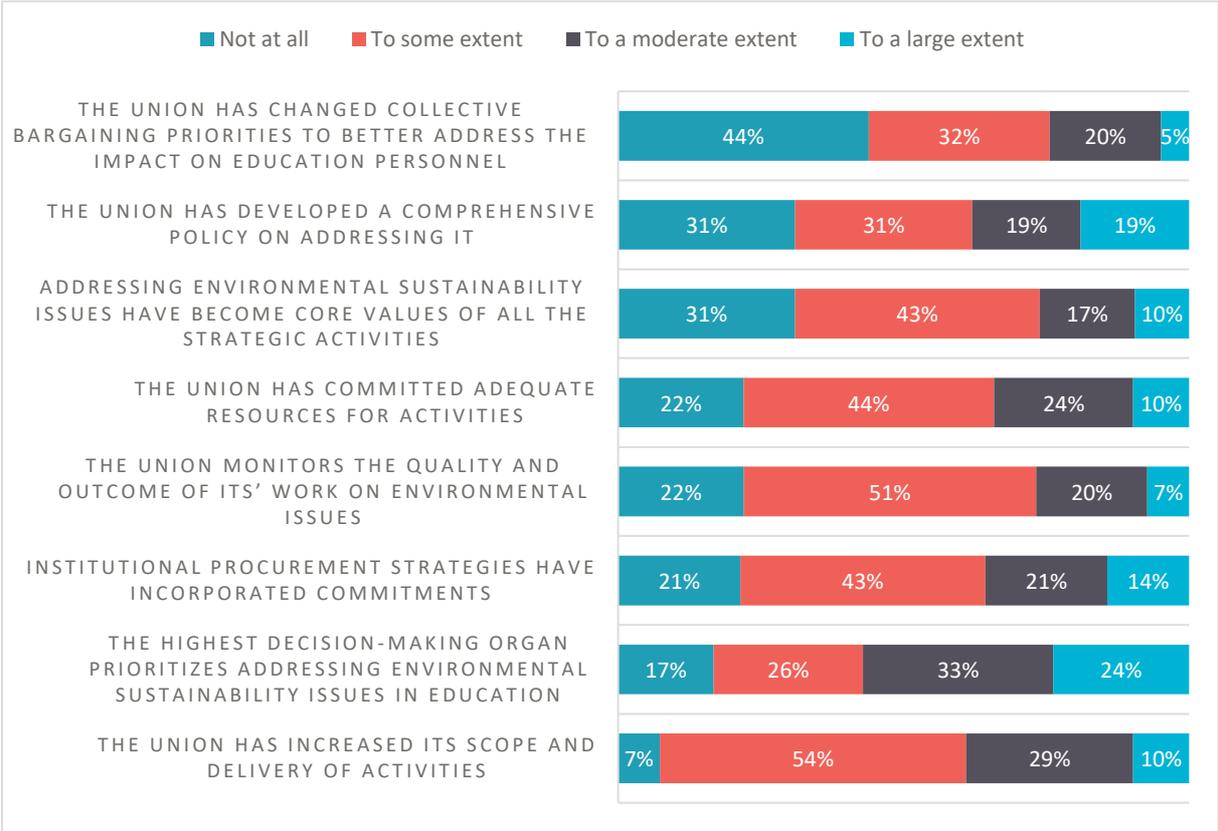
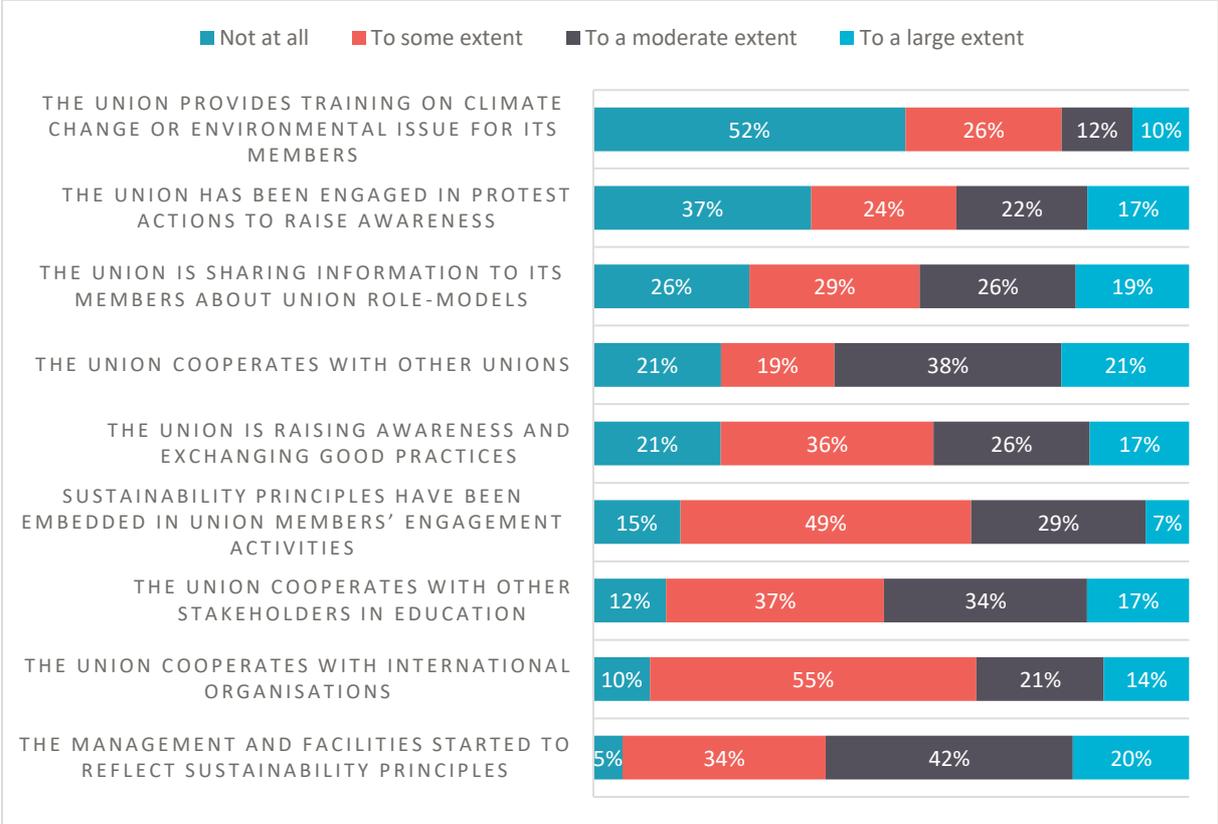ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, N: 42

More than half of the respondents that report that their union does not have a comprehensive policy in place at all, do not engage in social dialogue on the topic and attribute this to environmental sustainability not being a priority by the union or leadership. Overall, there is a lack of urgent priority and strategic action within the unions on environmental sustainability. While some of this is due to the limited human and financial resources within the unions themselves, the main reason is that the unions

so far have not considered the topic of environmental sustainability issues and measures important for their work and only in the context of improving wages. This is due to the difficulty of prioritizing the topic in discussions with employers and the difficulty to fitting the topic in the traditional trade union's agenda (e.g., working conditions, labour rights, pay). Especially in the countries where social dialogue is very rarely occurring, it is difficult to prioritise education for environmental sustainability in the social dialogue over more traditional topics.

Education trade unions' practices and day-to-day activities

In open-ended questions, several respondents stated that they are in the explorative phase of policymaking on how to deal with the climate emergency in education and that they would have devoted more resources to it if the union had more funds, dedicated staff and time available. 22 per cent of the respondents' unions have not dedicated sufficient resources for activities and that they also don't monitor the quality of their impact in this regard. There is therefore a huge need for ETUCE member organisations to learn what works and be inspired to invest more time, staff and overall effort in sustainable practices, projects and in including the topic on the social dialogue agenda. The most frequent forms of actions revolved around the dissemination of information: thematic events (42 per cent) and publications (39 per cent).

FIGURE 7. EXTENT TO WHICH ETUCE MEMBER ORGANISATIONS ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES IN THEIR PRACTICES

ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 40*

Other measures such as strikes were less frequently reported (10 per cent), although preparing trade union representatives for negotiations did occur (37 per cent). This is reasonable given that the strike is

the highest and ultimate form of protest if negotiations fail. Therefore, although the student strike for action against climate change was reported as a positive influence in open-ended questions by several respondents, striking and protesting is less likely to be reported by survey participants as occurring frequently.

Similarly to the situation with policies and priorities, few respondents reported that the union provides training on climate change mitigation and adaptation. More than half of the respondents report that the union does not at all provide training on climate change or environmental issues for its members. Only 10 per cent do this to a large extent. Some of the good practices highlighted by the study indeed included examples of unions that provide training for their members and share good practices.

Education trade unions' unique tools: social dialogue and collective bargaining

Half of the participating ETUCE member organisations reported that environmental sustainability was not included /addressed in their social dialogue agenda with the employers. The survey finds that the most frequent form employed is information sharing followed by bipartite negotiation, consultation of social partners and tripartite negotiation, taking into account the social dialogue system of the respective country.

FIGURE 8. MOST FREQUENT FORM OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE ACTION ON ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN ETUCE UNIONS
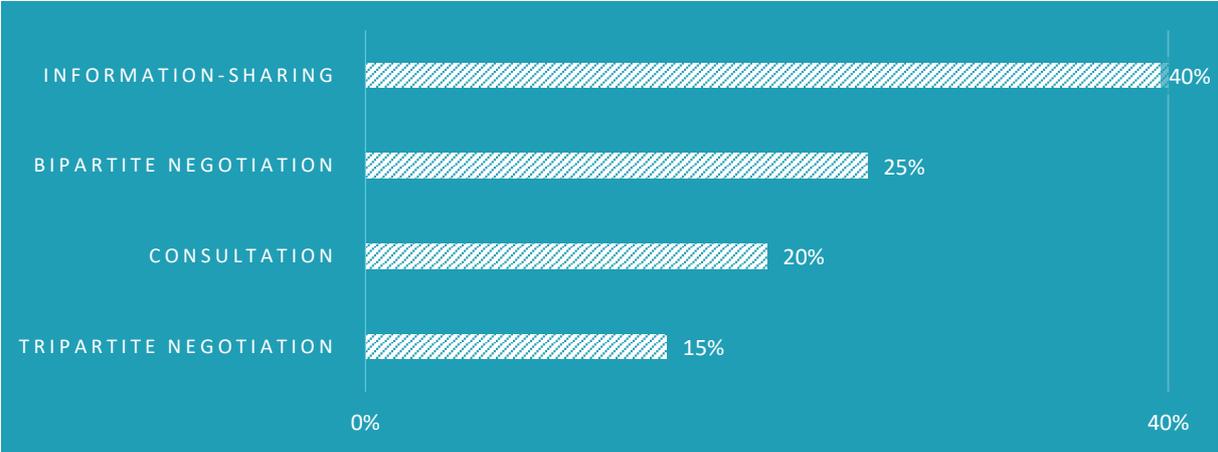
ETUCE Online Survey October-December 2021, *N: 20*

This shows that it is more challenging for unions to fit the topic within traditional trade unions' agendas and the more powerful negotiation methods with employers. While the unique and more powerful tools of education trade unions are social dialogue and collective bargaining, there are several barriers to the effectiveness of these measures for unions in different parts of Europe. Especially in countries where social dialogue rarely occurs, it is challenging to put education for environmental sustainability on the agenda. Other potential barriers are the lack of willingness from employers to discuss it in the social dialogue and the lack of knowledge on the topic within the society.

Since most of the social dialogue efforts concerned information-sharing, it became evident thatthe unions often are acting alone. The unions reported being quite isolated in working on the topic and more likely to collaborate within their sector or internationally than nationally and across sectors. Contrastingly, some of the good practices of education trade unions engaging with the topic of

sustainable development are occurring through cross-sectoral broad alliances (e.g., Denmark introducing education environmental sustainability in the collective agreement thanks to the cooperation of the trade unions in the public sector). This suggests that there is room to further explore possibilities for this type of action in the future for the ETUCE member organisations.

Following this background information, we welcome the workshop participants to express their opinion on the findings of the project research and consider the following reflection questions in working groups:

Working Groups: 1. Challenges facing education personnel due to environmental sustainability issues and measures:

- What other potential challenges besides those mentioned in this summary do teachers, academics and other education personnel face in your country to environmental sustainability issues? What other challenges do they face due to integration of the education for environmental sustainability?

- What are the main causes for the challenges this study has found (increased workload and health problems, insufficient curricula and assessment frameworks, lack of financial resources and good infrastructure at institutions, need for more accessible and relevant teacher training opportunities) in your country context?

- How, if at all, do the challenges you see for education trade union members differ in your region among teachers, academics and other education personnel in different regions, considering their gender, socio-economic status, or other background characteristics?

Working Groups: 2. Key elements of the role of education trade unions in addressing education and the environment for social change:

- In your country's context, what is the most effective way the education trade unions can address education and the environment for social change?

- What challenges, if any, do your education trade union face in addressing education and environment for social change in your country context (both within education trade union and outside trade union's factors)?

- What are barriers and enablers to addressing the education and environment for social change in the social dialogue in the education sector in your country's context?