

APRES COVID

European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Addressing Psychosocial Risks for an Equitable and Sustainable Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis

Case Study Visit in Portugal

9-10 October 2024

Introduction

The second case study visit of the social dialogue project [APRES COVID](#) - *European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Addressing Psychosocial Risks for an Equitable and Sustainable Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis* took place on 9-10 October 2024 in Lisbon (Portugal). The project, led by ETUCE and EFEET with the co-funding of the European Commission, constitutes a key action for the implementation of the [Work Programme 2024-2026](#) of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE). This second case study visit is part of a series of three national case studies. It focused on two VET school visits and a multistakeholder meeting where education employers, ministry representative, education trade union and parents' representatives were present. The aims were twofold: firstly, to engage with teachers, school leaders, and other education personnel during the school visits to address the tangible effects of psychological risks, especially those exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, through the multistakeholder meeting with relevant actors in the Portuguese education system, the case study aimed to foster potential joint initiatives and opportunities for further cooperation between social partners as well as with other relevant stakeholders (e.g., parents and students) in addressing psychological risks in education. The initiative also served as an opportunity to discuss good practices to enhance the working environment and mental health of teachers and education personnel.

This project activity included the participation of:

- National experts, members of the APRES COVID Project Advisory Group.
- The subcontracted research expert from the Visionary Analytics research team.
- Four members of the ETUCE and EFEET Secretariats.
- The subcontracted videomaker from Fermento.
- Portuguese Social Partners in Education, including:
 - Representatives of the Federação Nacional dos Sindicatos (National Federation of Education, FNE), the Federação Nacional dos Professores (National Federation of Teachers, FENPROF) and the Sindicato Nacional e Democrático dos Professores (National and Democratic Trade Union, SINDEP) for the trade union side.
 - Representatives of the Confederação Nacional da Educação e Formação (National Confederation of Education and Training, CNEF) and the Associação Nacional de

Escolas Profissionais (National Association of Professional Schools, ANESPO) for the employer's side.

- A representative from the Ministry of Education of Portugal.
- A representative of the Confederação Nacional das Associações de Pais (National Parents' Association, CONFAP).
- A representative of the (Lithuanian Vocational Training Institutions Association, LPMIA).
- The secondary school Escola Secundária Passos Manuel, including interviews with:
 - A school leader.
 - A deputy school leader.
- The VET Escola de Tecnologias Inovação e Criação (ETIC) school, including interviews with:
 - A school principal.
 - Two teachers.
 - A school psychologist.

The case study visit provided an insightful overview of the educational challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-term changes that the COVID-19 crisis triggered in the Portuguese education systems and industrial relations in education.

This report highlights key findings discussed that emerged during the discussion and interviews with the national stakeholders.



Secondary education and vocational education and training in Portugal

During the case study, participants learned about the Portuguese education system. Governed by the [1986 Education Act](#), which established the legal framework for public education, the Since then, Portugal has made significant progress in educational attainment rate, transitioning from historically low levels to aligning with European average. The secondary education system offers a variety of pathways to cater to different student needs.

The General Education track is designed to prepare students for higher education, offering a traditional academic curriculum, including Science & Technology or Humanities. For those with an interest in the arts, the Specialised Artistic Education path provides focused training in artistic disciplines, aimed at fostering careers in this field. The Professional Education (VET) pathway emphasises career readiness, with strong partnerships between schools and companies, allowing students to gain practical experience. Additionally, the Specialised Curriculum offers tailored courses for students pursuing specific career paths.



Portuguese schools are typically large and organised into clusters, where one headmaster manages several schools within a cluster. This model was introduced following the financial crisis to reduce administrative costs. While this approach streamlines the coordination, it also creates a complex educational network. However, some schools continue to operate independently, maintaining direct oversight from the Ministry of Education. Despite the benefits of this network structure, it presents significant challenges. Clusters often span large geographical areas – sometimes up to 50 kilometres apart – creating logistical inefficiencies. Teachers face significant workloads, particularly those who must work across multiple schools. Additionally, coordinators, who manage daily operations within

individual schools, receive fewer benefits than schoolmaster and many of them add on this responsibility on the top of their role of teachers.

The establishment of Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools in Portugal in 1989 marked a significant step towards providing practical, career-focused education and responded to the need for qualifications. By acknowledging the importance of hands-on training, VET schools aim to prepare students for the job market, they contribute to economic growth and competitiveness and promote social inclusion and accessibility.

One of the key objectives of VET schools is to respond to the economic and social needs of the country. This involves aligning curricula with the demands of companies and social actors to ensure that students are well-prepared for the workforce. Strong collaboration with the government, particularly the Ministry of Education, is essential for maintaining open lines of communication. This partnership ensures that VET programmes meet national educational standards while also being responsive to market demands. Additionally, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) provides a mandatory framework that guides the evaluation and recognition of vocational education across Europe. VET schools prioritise helping students secure jobs, often facilitating employment with the companies where they intern. However, many VET students also aspire for higher education, creating a dual objective for these institutions: to prepare students for immediate job readiness while also supporting their academic ambitions, despite this not being the primary purpose of VET.



A significant component of the VET experience is practical training and internships, often referred to as the Prova de Aptidão Profissional (PAP, Professional Aptitude Test). These internships offer students hands-on experience and serve as a crucial link to the job market. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on this aspect of education, as many students missed the opportunity to complete their internships. This disruption hindered their practical education and job prospects, making it particularly challenging to teach practical skills in a remote or theoretical context. Moreover, VET schools face challenges related to student retention. Some students choose to drop out after turning 18 to start full-time work at the companies where they completed their internships.

This early transition into the workforce often leads to students not finishing their formal education, benefiting companies that can hire them at a lower cost before they officially graduate.

In summary, while VET schools in Portugal play a crucial role in addressing the need for practical education aligned with market demands, they must navigate challenges related to student retention and the impact of external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure their students' success.

The impact of the COVID-19 on work-life-balance

The impact of the COVID-19 on work-life balance has been significant for all the interviewees. The Vice Director saw the need for reorganising class arrangements to maintain safety through social distancing measures, which proved practical and was maintained post-pandemic. The personal workload also increased after taking on a leadership role during this period.

For the headmaster, the teacher shortage became more severe after COVID-19, leading to greater emotional stress among staff. Psychosocial risks, such as burnout, resulted in more frequent sick leaves. To address these challenges, schools stopped holding classes on Friday afternoons, allowing teachers – especially those commuting from outside Lisbon – time to go back home earlier and rest. Additionally, other well-being support initiatives were introduced, such as yoga and team-building trips.

The onset of COVID-19 brought significant changes to the educational landscape, leaving many schools, including technical institutions, coping with stress, confusion and a lack of clear plans for transitioning to remote learning. Cultural factors played a substantial role during this period as mental health issues were often not openly discussed or acknowledged, leading both students and teachers to keep their struggles – such as stress and illness – private. This reluctance to admit personal challenges was compounded by an ingrained hesitation to take time off work, even when feeling overwhelmed. However, the conversation around mental health has shifted in the wake of the pandemic. Students are increasingly seeking help from psychologists, while teachers and staff continue to navigate the complexities of addressing these issues in a practical context through dialogue, awareness raising and headmaster's open-door policy, encouraging teachers to seek support and advice whenever needed.



The adaptation to online tools was another critical change. Teachers quickly embraced platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom which enabled remote learning, leading to increased digital

communication. While some teachers found this transition efficient, others felt it added to their already considerable workloads. The absence of face-to-face interactions made teaching more challenging since many reported that online learning lacked effectiveness, leaving both teachers and students fatigued and limiting meaningful engagement. Despite these challenges, online tools have remained a valuable resource, with some teachers labelling them as "the best thing that came out of COVID." Yet, the flexibility offered by these digital tools blurred the lines between personal and professional life, complicating the work-life-balance.

The impact of the pandemic significantly heightened stress levels among teachers, who felt pressure to be constantly available and connected. The comparison to employees in a call centre was brought up. Managing the well-being of both their students and theirs added to this weight. Concurrently, students faced their own psychological challenges, with many experiencing increased anxiety, lack of concentration, and diminished self-esteem. This disconnect led to a notable decline in social skills, causing communication difficulties and fragmenting social interactions. While these issues were exacerbated by the pandemic, they were already visible trends prior to COVID-19.

As education continues to evolve, blended learning models have emerged as a potential solution, with some teachers recognising the benefits of hybrid approaches. However, others argue that the digital shift may hinder student engagement, leading to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of online tools. Additionally, teacher-student relationships have been affected, with some teachers feeling increasingly disconnected from their students. Particularly, younger teachers, may have found it easier to connect with the new generation, while more senior teachers often struggled to adapt to the rapid changes in student behaviour and expectations.

Identified challenges because and in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic

Among the major issues, an ongoing teacher shortage was repeatedly described as the "problem of the decade." In regions with high cost of living such as Lisbon and the Algarve, many teachers were



reported to struggle to afford accommodation due to low pay. This has forced the headmaster to step in and teach science, as a lack of qualified staff persists. The seniority-based system also adds to the instability, with frequent transfers leading to staffing gaps in various areas.

The influx of migrant students has also significantly impacted the school system, with numbers rising from 53,000 in school year 2018/2019 to 140,000 in school year 2023/2024. Many of these students come from Brazil and African Portuguese-speaking countries, though not exclusively. Language barriers between migrant parents and schools complicate their involvement in the education process. To mitigate this issue, schools provide assistance with legal matters and Portuguese language support. Applications like

Microsoft Translator are used for communication, but they are limited to ensure students still learn Portuguese.

Digital bullying and phone use were reported as emerging as new challenges, particularly post-COVID. While phone usage at school is generally manageable, incidents occurring outside the school premise often escalate before being detected. This creates concerns about students' online behaviour, as schools find it difficult to monitor activities that happen at home.

To support mental health, the school swiftly adapted to online learning during the pandemic, providing training for teachers and ensuring access to technology for both students and staff. Increased collaboration between teachers and the headmaster, enabled by communicators like WhatsApp, has helped maintain strong support systems through regular message exchanges. Despite this, some students had to rely on NGOs and/or social institutions for additional resources, as the school's own support systems were stretched thin.



The role of multistakeholder dialogue in education

Enhancing occupational well-being in education requires a focused approach from an Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) perspective. A common need expressed by the teachers reflects a desire for respect, with complaints centring on excessive bureaucracy. Schools, in their attempt to avoid external scrutiny, often generate administrative burdens that overwhelm teachers. The management of teacher careers and the challenges in leadership dynamics were mentioned as crucial in supporting the occupational well-being.

Representative of the Ministry of Education stressed the importance of positive feedback from school leaders to motivate staff, while lamenting the lack of collaborative work among teachers themselves. Although COVID-19 is no longer a direct conversation point, its long-lasting impact on the teaching profession was reported to remain, particularly with the rapid digitalisation that changed classroom dynamics. It was also pointed out that tackling psychosocial risks in education requires both resources and knowledge, with funding being critical to supporting mental health initiatives and reducing bureaucracy. In addition, a larger political will to address these challenges is needed. There is an ongoing dialogue about these issues within Portugal's collective bargaining framework, especially regarding the "right to disconnect" and the continued importance of digital tools in education. Bureaucratic demands, such as compulsory reports to the Ministry and repeated administrative tasks, exacerbate teacher workloads, a problem documented by trade union representatives. Particularly in Portugal, the aging teaching workforce is another pressing concern, which calls for urgent retention policies. There are also discussions on how digitalisation continues to divide, especially in terms of resources and training.

For decades, occupational health and safety directives have been present but under-implemented in the education sector in Portugal. Despite having tools to address work-related stress and absenteeism, the progress is slow. The pandemic, however, accelerated attention to psychosocial risks (PSR). It was reported by Portuguese education social partners that by 2025, PSR-related absenteeism will surpass traditional causes like musculoskeletal disorders. Therefore, schools must adopt new post-COVID policies to address these emerging risks effectively. Additionally, schools lack a clear mission to cultivate preventive behaviours in future generations, leaving gaps in how safety and well-being are embedded into educational cultures.

The discussion emphasised the importance of adapting leadership styles, school culture, and utilising available tools to create healthier work environments for teachers and school leaders. Accordingly, addressing the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the educational community requires a multifaceted approach to support the well-being of all the actors involved. The Ministry of Education has taken significant steps to alleviate stress among teachers, specifically targeting national issues that contributed to their hectic schedules. Training programmes for school leaders were designed to improve the organisation of school clusters, promoting more effective management practices.

Another response to the crisis was to revise existing pedagogical models and to incorporate technology more thoughtfully into the classroom. As the teaching workforce ages in Portugal, social partners underlined the need to reshape how teachers perceive their roles and instructional methods. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) was described as a vital tool for career progression, but it must be transformed from a bureaucratic obligation into a meaningful opportunity for growth. This involves rethinking the overall design of teachers' professional statutes and linking them to more practical and less bureaucratic appraisal processes. Teachers should not have to compartmentalise their expertise. Instead, there should be a holistic approach to assessing and enhancing their practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened the door for these necessary changes.



The pandemic has also impacted parental participation in education. It raises the question of whether the challenges faced stem from the COVID-19 itself or from the broader societal changes that have arisen from it. A major issue is the dependence on technology, which affects the entire community. Teachers often struggle with time management, leaving them little room to focus on developing new tools and strategies for teaching. Many are exhausted, making it difficult to engage meaningfully with their students.

Furthermore, the size of classrooms plays a significant role in this challenge as large classes are more likely to hinder meaningful connections between teachers and students. With 14% of students coming from different countries and 20% at risk of poverty and exclusion, the strain on the educational system is evident. The 160% increase in the number of students remaining in class due to social security issues further complicates the situation. Moreover, many teachers are also parents, often forced to choose

between extracurricular activities, such as sports, and ensuring their children get enough resting time and sleep.

It is therefore crucial to recognise that families must not be neglected. Addressing issues posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and not only, requires a collective societal effort. The pandemic has exacerbated various social problems, including a high divorce rate and the rise of single-parent households, with approximately 500,000 single-parent households now in existence. Consequently, behavioural issues within schools have become more prevalent, underscoring the need for conflict mediators to be introduced into the educational environment to help navigate these challenges.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on the educational community, highlighting existing challenges while also prompting new discussions around mental health, psychosocial risks, teaching methodologies, and the dynamics of teacher-student relationships, there is a need for a collaborative approach involving teachers, school heads, parents, government and the wider community, which is essential for fostering a supportive and healthy educational environment for all.

Recommendations

To tackle the above-mentioned challenges, recommendations for improvement were discussed and included strengthening partnerships with external organisations, such as health services, to better address students' psychological and social needs. Additionally, teachers' and school heads' support is critical as they face substantial workloads and emotional strain. A greater emphasis on the well-being of both students and staff is necessary. Although teacher shortages and challenging working conditions existed before COVID-19, the pandemic has exacerbated these problems, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms. With an ageing workforce – around 60% of teachers are over 50 – and a large number approaching retirement, improving teacher retention and working conditions has become crucial to the teaching profession.

During the pandemic, the school had to rapidly transition to online learning, which involved training teachers and ensuring both students and staff had access to the necessary technology. This sudden shift posed significant challenges, but it also fostered increased collaboration between teachers and the headmaster. Post-COVID, this collaboration has been maintained through supportive networks, such as WhatsApp groups, which help keep communication open and ensure that everyone feels supported.

Future considerations highlight the need for a collective societal reflection on the changes brought about by the post-COVID world, particularly the loss of physical and mental safe spaces. Addressing burnout is a priority, as teachers require time to recuperate from the stresses of pandemic-era teaching. Bringing in new teachers, who are more attuned to the current generation, could help ease the pressures faced by older staff members.

To create stronger support systems, schools must enhance communication with health services and improve psychological and social support for students, teachers, school heads and other education personnel. Additionally, the rapid digitalisation of education, while crucial during the pandemic, has prompted concerns about its long-term effects on learning, mental health, and the work-life balance

of teachers and students. As one of the participants mentioned, "What we gained through digitalisation, we lost somewhere else," emphasising the need to thoughtfully assess technology's role in education.

