

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 Malta

22-23 January 2025

Introduction

The third 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 22-23 January in Malta. The project, led by ETUCE and EFEE 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 case study comes as the last of a series of three national case studies. As part of this study visit, activities were organised around two field visits in education institutions and a national social dialogue meeting.

This project activity included the participation of:

- National experts, members of the APRES COVID Project Advisory Group.
- A member of the subcontracted research team from Visionary Analytics.
- Five members of the ETUCE and EFEE Secretariats.
- The subcontracted video-maker from Fermento.
- Maltese Social Partners in Education, including:
 - Representatives Malta Teachers Union (MUT),
 - Representatives from the Ministry of Education Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation of Malta.
- The University of Malta, including interviews with:
 - A senior lecturer.
 - A professor.
 - A head of department.
- The Margaret Mortimer Secondary School Santa Lucia, including interviews with:
 - The deputy school head.
 - A guidance teacher.
 - A newly qualified teacher.

For this case study, field visits targeted a university and a secondary school, including vocational education and training (VET) tracks. Here participants engaged with education staff, teachers, education support personnel, academics and researchers on the impact of psychosocial risks, particularly taking into account the long-lasting changes of the COVID-19 crisis.

In light of Malta's well-integrated social dialogue practices and structure in education, with a consolidated integration of national education social partners in the European structure of ETUCE and EFEF, the social dialogue meeting was the opportunity to dive deeper into social dialogue cooperation. In particular, participants got insights about the Maltese case study for a sectoral agreement as an inspiring good practice of social dialogue. They further explored the opportunities to implement the use of OiRA tools to prevent psychosocial risks in the education sector. This meeting was also a unique opportunity to seek synergies with other files and priorities on occupational health and safety as part of the work that European Education Social partners are currently carrying out within the ESSDE activities and their Work Programme. Particularly, participants explored the opportunities to implement OiRA tools to prevent psychosocial risks in education which directly links to the work carried out by the ESSDE Committee for the development of a new European tool for higher education and research ([Launched in November 2024](#)). Besides, in view of the start of the negotiations for a sectoral autonomous agreement on telework and the right to disconnect in spring 2025, a working group session was held as part of the Maltese social dialogue meeting to gather inputs from participants on existing national practices to implement and protect the right to disconnect in the education sector.

The information of the report is based on the presentations during the case study. This report highlights key findings that emerged during the discussion and interviews with the national social partners and relevant national stakeholders.



The Maltese Educational system: Focus on secondary education and Higher Education and Research (HER)

An overview of the Maltese educational system in secondary and higher education was presented by national education social partners. Education in Malta comprises 11 compulsory school years, culminating in school-leaving assessments that grant students Secondary Education Certificates at Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 3. Beyond this stage, students can either pursue academic studies in post-secondary institutions or opt for vocational education and training (VET), leading to further qualifications at MQF Levels 4 and beyond.

Secondary education is divided into state, church, and independent sectors. The state sector, the largest, is organised into colleges based on geographical proximity, whereas church and independent schools admit students from across the country. There are 15 state secondary schools, alongside additional institutions that cater to specific educational needs. The curriculum includes core subjects alongside vocational and optional disciplines, with assessment methods combining continuous School-based Assessment and final examinations. Additionally, Malta's educational framework includes middle schools, which bridge the transition between primary and secondary education, catering to students aged 11 to 13 before they progress to secondary school.

Educators within the state sector are recruited through a centralised process, ensuring that vacancies across different schools are filled based on national needs. Teachers in this sector have the opportunity to apply for transfers to different institutions on an annual basis, which allows for some flexibility in career progression. In contrast, recruitment within the non-state sector is managed independently by each school, requiring educators to go through separate selection processes if they wish to move between institutions.

Assessment within the Maltese secondary education system combines both formative and summative approaches. School-based Assessment plays an integral role in evaluating students' progress throughout their studies. This approach incorporates continuous assessment methods, such as research projects, practical tasks, and presentations, in addition to traditional examinations. Some disciplines, however, may adopt different assessment methods to suit their specific educational objectives.

Post-secondary education offers two main pathways: academic and vocational. The regulation of further and higher education falls under the jurisdiction of the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. This state-owned authority is responsible for licensing, accreditation, and quality assurance within the sector. Vocational education is primarily provided by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology and the Institute of Tourism Studies, the former enrolling a significantly larger student population.

Higher education is led by the University of Malta, offering degrees from MQF Level 6 to post-doctoral studies at Level 8, and the Institute for Education, which focuses on teacher training. Private institutions and international collaborations also contribute to the sector. The Malta Further and

Higher Education Authority regulates the sector, overseeing licensing, accreditation, and quality assurance.

While progress has been made, some challenges persist. The secondary education system faces challenges, particularly in teacher shortages, with STEM subjects being the most affected like in the primary sector. Retaining teachers within the profession also remains a concern, with efforts needed to improve working conditions and career incentives. Furthermore, the education system must continuously adapt to support students with diverse abilities and needs, ensuring that every learner receives the assistance necessary to succeed. Language barriers also pose a challenge, particularly for foreign students who may struggle to communicate in English. To address this, initiatives such as induction programmes focusing on literacy have been introduced, facilitating a smoother integration process for international learners.

In the higher education sector, early school leaving, though reduced, remains around 10%, partly due to strong employment opportunities that deter students from continuing their studies. The growing emphasis on IT and vocational education has influenced student preferences, sometimes at the expense of traditional academic disciplines. A major reform in assessment methods, combining continuous and summative assessment, is reshaping further and higher education. Research funding and talent retention remain critical issues, with efforts needed to enhance opportunities in academia. In response, the government has prioritised STEM education and implemented strategies to address teacher shortages and improve education quality.

Despite these challenges, the Maltese educational system continues to strive to balance accessibility, quality, and inclusivity. While challenges remain, ongoing efforts aim to strengthen the sector, ensuring that it meets the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.



The long-term impact of COVID-19 on occupational well-being in the Maltese educational systems

The survey gathered insights from representatives of education employees and employers on the long-term impact of COVID-19 on psychosocial risks in the education sector. As it reflects the perspectives of representatives rather than frontline professionals, the findings highlight broad trends rather than individual experiences.

A key finding was the widespread increase in workload across all educational roles. The impact was most pronounced for teachers, with 76% of respondents reporting an increase—41% stating it had increased "a lot" and 35% "a little." Similarly, 67% believed school leaders had experienced increased workloads, while 59% felt this applied to educational institutions as a whole. The most significant internal pressures were related to digitalisation, with 78% of respondents reporting an increase, and time constraints, which affected 66%. The rapid shift towards digital tools, accelerated by the pandemic, reshaped teaching and administrative practices, increasing pressure on education professionals to adapt to new technologies.

Educators also faced growing external demands. Increased pressure from parents (63%) and school management (61%) was notable, with respondents indicating heightened expectations regarding communication, accessibility, and performance. Pressure from students was also a factor, with 58% of respondents noting an increase. However, only 42% of respondents reported rising pressure from colleagues, suggesting that peer support remained relatively stable.

The long-term impact of COVID-19 on mental health in the teaching profession was another major concern. Excessive workload was the most significant factor affecting mental well-being across the EU, with 78% of respondents identifying it as a key issue. Aggressive behaviours from students and parents (63%) and the digitalisation of work (59%) were also reported as contributors to stress and burnout. In Malta, digitalisation and excessive workload were seen as the most significant factors affecting mental health. While the school visits highlighted strong institutional support mechanisms, not all schools in Malta may have access to the same level of resources and support. This variation underscores the need for ongoing investment in staff well-being and professional development to ensure a balanced and sustainable working environment across all schools.

Psychosocial issues in the education sector have increased, with approximately three-quarters of all respondents believing the pandemic exacerbated these challenges. In Malta, perceptions of burnout and anxiety were notably higher than in other contexts. However, resources to support well-being at work were considered insufficient, with 59% of respondents across the EU finding them unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory. In Malta, this figure stood at 50%, reinforcing the need for stronger mental health and support systems.

The findings show that workload, pressure, and psychosocial risks have increased since the pandemic, presenting lasting challenges for education professionals. In many countries, COVID-19 acted as a catalyst rather than the root cause of these issues. Stronger support systems are needed to improve well-being in the education sector, mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic, and enhance the profession's overall attractiveness.

The following findings are based on the interviews conducted during the field visits.

- **Higher education**

The long-term impact of COVID-19 on higher education has been shaped by increased digitalisation, evolving teaching practices, and institutional support. The pandemic accelerated the use of technology, forcing educators to adapt rapidly. While this shift increased workloads and blurred work-life boundaries, strong support structures helped mitigate these challenges.

The introduction of digital tools and online learning was one of the most immediate changes brought about by the pandemic. While some educators were initially resistant to adopting new technologies, the necessity of remote teaching prompted a shift in attitudes. Both staff and students were reported to be more technologically aware, with digital literacy becoming an integral part of the learning process. This change has had significant pedagogical implications, with some educators incorporating AI tools to develop students' critical engagement with technology. However, the increased reliance on digital platforms also led to a blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. The loss of spatial and temporal separation between professional and personal time was acknowledged, with some staff members expressing the need for self-imposed boundaries to avoid burnout.



Despite these challenges, the experience of digital learning and blended teaching has highlighted both its limitations and opportunities. While some of the interviewees appreciate the flexibility and accessibility of online tools, others expressed a preference for face-to-face teaching, particularly in discussion-based courses. Online learning was often perceived as increasing preparation time while reducing the spontaneous and interactive elements of in-person education. Furthermore, concerns were raised about student learning loss during the pandemic, particularly regarding the social aspects of education, which are difficult to replicate in a virtual setting.

Beyond teaching practices, the overall occupational well-being of staff was strongly linked to the support they received from their institutions. Interviewees consistently highlighted the value of professional development opportunities, including university-funded training courses and ongoing digital skills initiatives. Institutional investment in digital tools—such as Zoom licenses and AI guidelines—helped facilitate smoother transitions to new teaching methods. The presence of the

University well-being Centre is an important support to provide mental health support to both students and teachers.

A key takeaway is the need to balance technological advancements with human-centred policies. AI and digital tools should complement rather than replace core teaching practices. Work-life balance remains a challenge, requiring both institutional policies and individual strategies. The pandemic reshaped higher education, but structured support systems played a decisive role in ensuring well-being.

Overall, the experiences of the staff interviewed reflect a positive adaptation to the post-pandemic academic environment. While the pandemic introduced profound changes to higher education, the presence of structured support systems played a decisive role in ensuring occupational well-being.

- **Secondary education**

The pandemic left lasting effects on secondary education in Malta, influencing teaching methods, digital adaptation, student well-being, and educators' work conditions. Schools largely returned to pre-pandemic norms, but digital tools remain widely used. Platforms like Microsoft Teams and online parent-teacher meetings improved efficiency but also blurred boundaries, as parents expect greater availability. While there is no formal right-to-disconnect policy, schools encourage teachers to limit communication to official channels.

Despite efficiency gains, the education system remains demanding. Teachers report increased workloads, not solely due to COVID-19 but because of ongoing changes and evolving student needs. The expanding role of teachers adds pressure, with frequent policy and curriculum changes causing "reform fatigue." Educators need more time to adapt, prepare materials, and adjust to students' evolving learning styles.

Guidance teachers face greater responsibilities. During the pandemic, personal and career guidance was largely paused. Now, they assist a growing number of students dealing with anxiety and social isolation, partly linked to excessive social media use. Although the guidance team includes specialists like school counsellors and psychologists, there is a shortage of social workers. Balancing personal and career guidance remains challenging, and some believe separating these roles would improve support.

Education support staff also took on expanded roles during school closures, providing tutoring and learning assistance. Some benefited from online training to gain teaching qualifications, but overall workloads increased. While they played a key role in maintaining student engagement, communication challenges persisted, particularly for families with limited digital literacy. Post-pandemic, some parents struggle to return to formal communication channels, highlighting the need for more structured and inclusive family engagement.

Reintegrating extracurricular activities has been another challenge. Participation was slow to recover after their suspension during COVID-19. However, teachers played a crucial role in re-engaging students and reinforcing the importance of clubs for socialisation and inclusion beyond formal learning.



Institutional support has been vital in adapting to post-pandemic challenges. Teachers emphasise the importance of time to adapt, trust from school leadership, and training opportunities. Support from colleagues and a positive school environment have been crucial. The Employee Support Programme, which existed before COVID-19, became more widely known during the pandemic. Teachers now have a better understanding of available support systems, and collaboration between the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) and the Ministry of Education has strengthened their sense of protection. However, there is still a need for enhanced psychosocial support, particularly in response to changing family structures and rising student mental health needs.

Training was highlighted as key to adaptation. Online teaching helped educators develop digital skills, but further training is needed for both teachers and parents. Schools recognise the importance of early collaboration with families. While parents appear to have higher expectations of teachers, educators do not always have ready solutions for every challenge. Strengthening school-family collaboration is essential to supporting students effectively.

The long-term impact of COVID-19 on secondary education in Malta reflects a mix of adaptation, increased responsibilities, and institutional change. While many aspects of school life have returned to pre-pandemic norms, the experience has left a lasting mark on teaching methods, student well-being, and educators' professional expectations. Institutional and peer support have helped sustain occupational well-being, but continued structured support, adequate training, and clear professional boundaries are essential for a sustainable and fulfilling work environment in schools.

A concrete case of social dialogue success: The Maltese sectoral agreement 2023-2027

The Maltese sectoral agreement represents the largest and most comprehensive agreement for sectoral grades in Malta, covering approximately 11,000 employees in the education sector. Negotiated between the Ministry of Education, and the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), this agreement goes beyond employment conditions and financial aspects. It also serves as a strategic policy document, reflecting a broader vision for education in the country. Through its provisions, the entire educational landscape is examined, ensuring alignment with national educational priorities.

One of the defining characteristics of the agreement is its reach. It directly applies to educators in public schools and Church schools, with the Maltese government responsible for funding the salaries of teachers in the latter. Additionally, it indirectly influences independent (private) schools, serving as a reference point for employment conditions across the sector. Beyond teachers, the agreement encompasses multiple professional grades, including deputy school heads, heads of schools, education officers, heads of departments, kindergarten educators, learning support educators, and supply grades.

Negotiations for the 2023-2027 agreement began as the previous one neared expiration. The process was highly structured, with the MUT gathering member feedback through consultations, online surveys, and in-person meetings. Working groups were established to ensure that different professional categories had a voice, while the MUT Council closely monitored progress, providing strategic direction. Presentations were used to communicate proposals effectively, helping to consolidate demands and refine negotiation strategies. However, progress stalled, leading to industrial action, including a one-day strike which mobilised around 97% of all educators in Malta and represented a turning point in the negotiation process. This intensified discussions, with renewed negotiations in late 2023 ultimately leading to an agreement. Finalising the deal required extensive dialogue, particularly on financial matters. A key challenge was addressing the concerns of senior educators over salaries. After further amendments, the agreement was put to a member vote, receiving 92% approval. It was signed on 15 July 2024, concluding a 1.5-year process.

Key takeaways from the negotiations include the importance of evidence-based discussion, the need for continuous social dialogue even after implementation, and the role of strategic decision-making in overcoming impasses.

Beyond salary adjustments and improved working conditions, the agreement introduced important measures concerning teacher retention and professional development. It also recognised the evolving nature of education, shifting from a student-centred to a people-centred approach. A particularly noteworthy element was the increased focus on occupational safety and health (OSH), with provisions for additional Health and Safety Teachers in schools, along with enhanced training for these educators. The establishment of a health and safety unit further underscored the government's commitment to providing a secure and supportive environment for both teachers and students.

Opportunities of using OiRA tools to prevent psychosocial risks in education

Despite its relevance, PSR remains one of the least explored areas in occupational risk assessment. For this reason, identifying the tools and structures to identify these risks is essential. During the social dialogue meeting, participants learnt more about the Online Interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) tools for the education sector. OiRA, developed by sectoral social partners (both at European and national level) with the support of the European Agency for Occupational Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSH)A, constitute a supporting tools for schools to conduct risk assessment, including of psychosocial risks.

Schools and educators continue to struggle with workplace stress, excessive workloads, and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, all of which impact well-being. However, risk assessment in education has traditionally focused on physical hazards rather than the psychological toll of the profession. OiRA, as a standardised and accessible tool, could be a step forward in formalizing PSR assessment in schools.

The education sector presents specific challenges when it comes to risk assessment. Large schools, for example, often reflect different workplace cultures across various departments and staff rooms. This diversity makes it difficult to implement a one-size-fits-all risk assessment approach. Moreover, there is often resistance to the process, either due to a lack of awareness, scepticism about its effectiveness, or concerns over how the results will be used. Trust is a crucial factor in conducting meaningful risk assessments, and without it, even the most well-designed tools risk being underutilized.

OiRA was developed precisely because many countries lack structured risk assessment frameworks, particularly for non-physical workplace risks. By providing a free, confidential, and standardized tool, OiRA allows different sectors, including education, to self-assess risks and identify solutions. However, there are limitations to its use. Some aspects of psychosocial risk are inherently difficult to quantify within a structured checklist, making the process feel overly rigid for a field as nuanced as education. Furthermore, carrying out a risk assessment using OiRA can be time-consuming, adding to the already heavy workload of educators.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of integrating OiRA into the education sector should not be overlooked. The tool offers a more comprehensive and structured approach than many existing national frameworks. More importantly, it fosters social dialogue between teachers, school management, and policymakers, an essential component for the successful implementation of any workplace policy. Additionally, OiRA allows for adaptability, meaning it can be tailored to the unique demands of the education sector.

One of the key takeaways from discussions around PSR in education is that while policies may exist, accessibility to support services remains an issue. Many educators are unaware of what resources are available to them, and schools often lack a clear, spelled-out policy on how to manage psychosocial risks. The introduction of OiRA could help bridge this gap by not only providing a framework for assessment but also raising awareness of existing support mechanisms and best practices for workplace well-being.

Ultimately, while OiRA alone may not solve the issue of psychosocial risks in education, it represents an important step in the right direction. By normalising risk assessment, increasing awareness, and encouraging collaborative solutions, it has the potential to improve working conditions for educators. However, for this potential to be realized, its implementation must be accompanied by a shift in

workplace culture that acknowledges the significance of psychosocial risks and actively works towards mitigating them.



Towards an Autonomous Framework Agreement in Education: Spotlight on the Right to Disconnect

During the APRES COVID project, the right to disconnect emerged as a recurring concern from the conversations with educators' interviews throughout the case studies.

The evolving nature of work, particularly in the education sector, has brought the right to disconnect to the forefront of discussions surrounding workplace policies and digital working conditions. Against this backdrop, ETUCE and EFEF are to start negotiations towards a sectoral agreement on telework and right to disconnect. The future European agreement is intended to be an important step to support national measures to ensure that educators can balance their professional responsibilities with their personal well-being.

During the case study ETUCE and EFEF Secretariats provided an overview of the main issues at stake for the development of the autonomous framework agreement in the education sector.

Defining the right to disconnect entails multiple aspects:

- The right of employees to be free from professional solicitation outside of working hours.

- Establishing minimum requirements on the use of digital tools for professional purposes beyond official working time.
- Promoting a workplace culture that discourages out-of-hours contact—a critical aspect that remains intangible and challenging to measure.

At the European level, the Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC) mandates minimum daily and weekly rest periods¹ to safeguard workers' health and safety. However, attempts at renegotiation have not progressed, leaving the right to disconnect in a legal grey area.

, defining working time itself presents complications. The combination of working time, rest time, stand-by periods, and on-call duties complicates applicability within the education sector.

One of the core dilemmas remains whether the right to disconnect should be formally defined or simply respected. A cross-sectoral definition proves difficult, as defining the right could necessitate revising the Working Time Directive. The challenge lies in ensuring respect for the right to disconnect while maintaining flexibility in working time arrangements.

The right to disconnect remains a complex issue in the education sector, with approaches varying across different national contexts. In some cases, legal frameworks exist to regulate after-hours communication, but their application to education professionals is not always clear. Attempts to incorporate the right to disconnect into collective agreements have faced challenges, often due to ongoing discussions at the European level or concerns about the practical implementation of such policies.

The increased use of digital tools has further blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. While technology can support structured communication policies, its widespread adoption has also created expectations of constant availability. This has reinforced the need for clearer guidelines to help education professionals set boundaries and prevent burnout.

In some countries, legal restrictions prevent employers from contacting employees outside working hours, offering a degree of protection. However, these regulations do not always extend to professionals with flexible schedules, including those in education. As a result, many education professionals navigate an informal culture where work-related communication continues beyond contracted hours.

A structured approach to the right to disconnect is needed to address these challenges. Establishing clear policies, revising communication protocols, and integrating technological solutions can help ensure that work-life balance is respected while maintaining the flexibility required in education.

Unlike other sectors, where employer-employee interaction is the primary concern, education involves significant contact with students and parents. Therefore, ensuring the right to disconnect requires:

- Acknowledgment that merely preventing employer contact is insufficient due to interactions with students and parents.

¹ Several countries, including Malta among others, have opted out from the Working Time Directive. To read more https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/empl/dv/empl20150416_eurofound_wtd_/empl20150416_eurofound_wtd_en.pdf

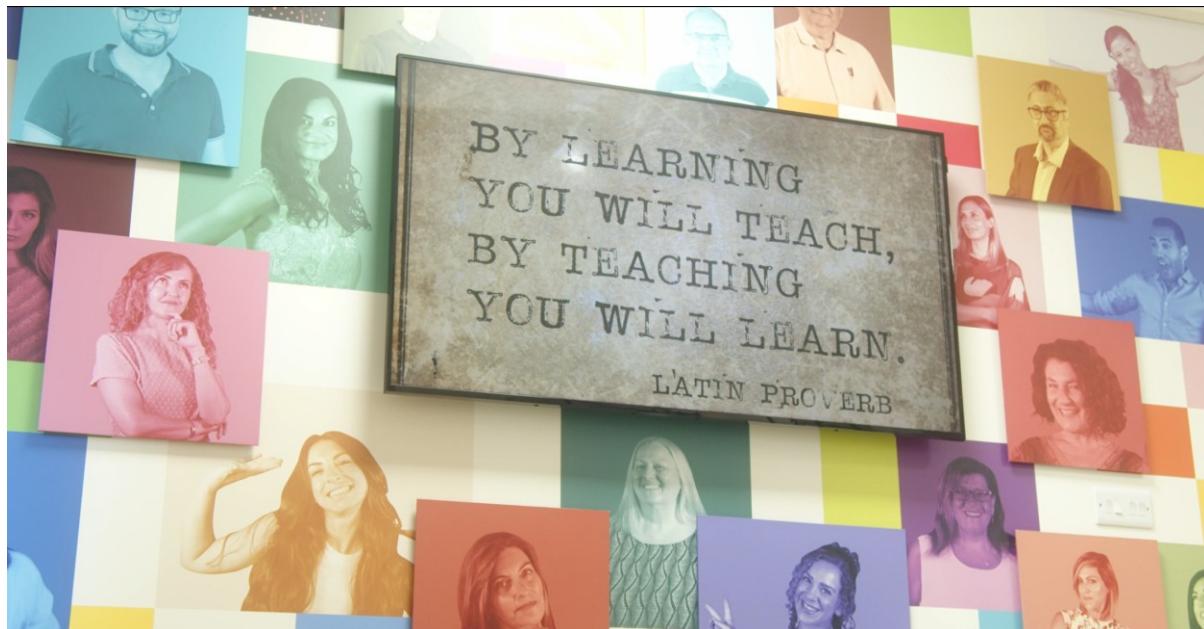
- Defining a clear framework for emergencies to establish boundaries and expectations.
- Clarification of working time definitions to prevent excessive work encroachment into personal time.

Recommendations for the European agreement:

For an effective European framework, the following considerations are essential:

- Providing flexibility for teachers to manage their workloads, including evenings and weekends, without imposing rigid deadlines.
- Increasing awareness of digital communication tools, such as scheduled emails, to reinforce the idea that immediate responses are not expected outside working hours.
- Establishing a framework for handling emergencies and raising awareness of existing support services.

A European agreement must balance structured protections with the inherent flexibility required in the education sector. By fostering awareness and defining reasonable boundaries, a sustainable and practical framework can be achieved to uphold the right to disconnect while preserving necessary professional interactions.



Conclusions

The school visits highlighted how Malta's education system benefits from well-developed human resources policies, ensuring that teachers have adequate resources and support. Simple yet effective measures, such as providing each teacher with their own desk, reflect a broader commitment to staff

well-being. Educators and support staff consistently reported feeling supported, which played a crucial role in mitigating the pressures brought on by the pandemic.

One of the most significant long-term effects of COVID-19 has been the increased use of digital tools in education. While this shift has enhanced teaching efficiency, it has also created new challenges, particularly regarding the need to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life. Teachers and staff noted the importance of disconnecting, as the expectation of being constantly available, particularly from parents, can lead to stress and burnout. While informal guidelines exist, a more structured approach to work-life balance could be beneficial.

Another pressing concern is the mental health of young people. Educators observed a rise in student anxiety and social isolation, often linked to excessive social media use. Schools have responded by reinforcing support networks, but the demand for specialised professionals, such as counsellors and social workers, remains high. Strengthening psychosocial support systems is essential to addressing these issues effectively.

The visits also underscored the importance of proximity in support systems. Malta's relatively small size allows for closer connections between education authorities, schools, and teachers, ensuring that policies are effectively implemented, and support is readily available. This model offers valuable lessons for larger countries, where bridging gaps between central education authorities and frontline educators is crucial. Ensuring direct and accessible support structures can enhance teacher well-being and, by extension, student outcomes.

Overall, the reflections emphasised the value of structured support, clear communication, and work-life balance in sustaining a resilient education system. The Maltese example demonstrates that



investing in both digital tools and human-centred policies can lead to a more adaptable and supportive teaching environment.