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The impact of COVID-19 crisis on higher education and research staff

To BFUG Plenary meeting of 15-16 April 2021, under the Portuguese Presidency

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) is a recognised European social partner for education and represents 11 million teachers and educators affiliated to 131 education trade unions across 49 European countries. It was established in 1975 and, since 2010, has been the Regional European Structure of Education International (EI). It is also a European Trade Union Federation of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). ETUCE is composed of national trade unions of teachers and other staff at all levels of general education, including higher education and research.

ETUCE has been conducting continuous discussions with national education trade unions on the impact of the pandemic on academic staff. The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on teachers and education systems across Europe. The central role of education personnel, and the substantial efforts of adaptation they have made to ensure the continuation of education was highlighted in [ETUCE Statement on tackling the COVID-19 crisis](#) (April 2020). ETUCE has been running a dedicated website on the impact of the COVID pandemic on teachers and education staff and to gather good practices of education trade union in tackling the crisis via the [ETUCE COVID-19 HUB](#). We addressed our concerns on the reopening of education institutions jointly with parents and students' associations in our [Joint ETUCE-OBESSU-EPA Statement on COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (May 2020). Additionally, [ETUCE Statement on COVID-19](#) (May 2020) called on governments to ensure health, safety, and access to education of refugees and migrants in face of the crisis.

In July 2020, Education International prepared a [policy briefing and guidance](#) on reopening the schools for the International Teachers' Summit. In March 2021, ETUCE conducted a study on the [vaccination of teachers and education staff](#).

Education International conducted a survey in spring 2020 among members on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in education systems. In their responses, the European member organizations reported consequential impact of the crisis on the higher education and research sector. When it comes to the transition to **distance and/or online education**, higher education teachers and researchers have been efficient in switching to new teaching methods and to making the most of the technology at their disposal, and in some cases, member organisations reported that the leap to distance classes was successful (eg. in Finland). In some countries teachers have had adequate **access to digital resources before the COVID-19 crisis**, therefore all teaching and all lectures could immediately be moved to digital platforms (eg in Norway).

Higher education teaching staff have made an admirable effort in order to make distance and digital education work, and for the most part they have succeeded, even if their digital competencies and skills were somewhat unevenly distributed. According to the education trade unions, the teaching staff are being supported with access to **appropriate curriculum based and pedagogical resources** (eg in France, Kosovo, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Switzerland, Spain).

However, all education trade unions in Europe reported that the crisis had a huge impact on the **teachers' employment position and remuneration**. For example:

- Teachers in permanent positions have been working for the whole period, while not all teachers and researchers on short-time contracts have had their contracts renewed (eg in Norway). Lecturers, honorary teachers (eg in Germany), and part-time teachers (eg in Finland) are in the risk zone to become unemployed. Substitute teachers on temporary contracts became unemployed (eg the Netherlands).
- The salaries of teachers earning above a certain level will be cut along with other civil servants (eg. Cyprus). In some, mostly private universities some of the infringement of employment contract happened (eg in Georgia)
- Some of the teachers and non-teaching personnel whose contract was due to expire at the beginning of the crisis were laid. However, in some cases the trade unions and the ministry agreed to hire them back (eg in Italy).
- Many academics had to put their research projects on hold in order to cope with all the new arrangements for education (eg in Norway), or researchers on fixed-term contracts lost their earnings from cancellation of face-to-face teaching (eg in the UK). There is a disruption of research projects but with no current plans for research funders and universities to extend duration of fixed-term contracts (and PhD studentships) during the crisis (eg in the UK).

The Higher Education and Research Standing Committee of ETUCE (HERSC), which gathers the European education trade unions which organize higher education and research staff in 47 countries, recently discussed the impact of the crisis on the higher education and research staff. In September 2020, in its [meeting](#) the participants shared good practices and underlined the **efforts that trades unions made during the COVID-19 crisis to support academics and researchers**. Some trade unions managed to **conclude collective agreements** in support of teachers, for example the Swedish SULF got teachers' overtime paid. The German trade union GEW obtained an option for the extension of **fixed-term contracts** over the expiration date according to the "Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act". Among other activities, **trade unions organised surveys and webinars, published studies and newsletters**, as well as maintained constant dialogue with teachers and governments.

Among the challenges in facing the COVID-19 crisis, members remarked the **inefficient support from governments and institutions**, as well as the **lack of equipment** and training for digital teaching.

The consequences of digital teaching also resulted in **heavier workload for teachers** who had difficulties in balancing the remote working with the home schooling of their children and had to reduce the time for research activities. In some cases, academics and researchers received pressures to continue working on campus, despite the unsafe and unhealthy working conditions.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis had a negative impact on **careers, increasing the precariousness of academics and researchers**, especially those on fixed-term contracts. In addition, there is a fear that jobs and/or hours will be cut due to forthcoming income shortfalls for universities resulting from **loss of revenue**

from international students. Education trade unions also experience an overall **lack of social dialogue** in this period.

In relation to the **Bologna Ministerial Meeting 2020 in Rome**, ETUCE [called](#) on 49 ministers of the Bologna Process countries to **ensure academic freedom and good working conditions** for staff. In the call and [report](#) to the Ministerial meeting ETUCE member organizations underlined that ministers also need to provide **urgent solutions to employees in the higher education and research sector** who are facing increased threats to their jobs, working conditions and professional status as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers are crucial actors in higher education, and they should be at the centre of the Bologna Process. Higher education academics and researchers need **permanent job security, reliable career paths and quality continuous professional development**. Moreover, quality teaching requires the freedom of teaching and discussion, the freedom in carrying out research and publishing its results, the freedom to express opinions about the institution and system in which academics work – thus the right to academic freedom.

Ahead of the ministerial conference, education trade unions of higher education and research staff [met](#) on 16 November 2021 and discussed the serious consequences the COVID-19 pandemic had on the working conditions of academics and researchers. Online and hybrid teaching resulted in **unsustainable workloads** for education staff and deteriorating of their **health and mental well-being**. Facing the increasing **commercialisation and marketisation** of higher education and research, as well as the pressures on the sector to make it more compliant with labour market requests, education trade unions renewed their [call for the respect of academic freedom](#).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic freedom and working conditions of the higher education and research staff was also discussed in the global [International Further and Higher Education and Research Conference \(IFHERC\)](#) of Education International on 14-15 February, 2021. Trade unions underlined that serious violations of **academic freedom and institutional autonomy** are on the rise, as is evidenced in [Free to Think Report 2020](#) of Scholars At Risk, which documents 341 attacks on higher education communities in 58 countries around the world, between September 2019 and end-August 2020.

In March 2021, the European trade unions of higher education and research staff [discussed](#) on the impact of COVID-19 crisis on **Open Educational Resources and Open Science** and the protection of **intellectual property rights (IPR)** in relation to online teaching material. In some countries the shift to online teaching materials had resulted in the copyright being automatically transferred to the institutions. The members consented on the need to make new agreements between institutions and teachers over online teaching materials and some trade unions, e.g. Finland, are already working on that. Concerning funding, despite wide differences in each education system, all members – with the exception of Sweden - remarked on a lack of additional resources for higher education to tackle the effects of the pandemic.

The education trade union believe that it is important to find a balance between open access and the protection of intellectual property rights (IPR). Copyright is essential for the **protection of academic freedom**, and excessive trust in open systems could be detrimental to **teachers' creativity and innovation**, leaving room for EdTech and private providers to fill in the void. Intellectual property rights of academic and researchers across Europe are increasingly under pressure, especially since the shift to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a concern among education trade unions on the increasing power gained by **EdTech companies** during the COVID crisis on digital education material, many times prepared by the teachers themselves. EdTech companies contribute to further commercialisation of

education and to increasing inequalities among students. Education International [conducted a research](#) and discussed about this issue in an online conference in July 2020.

While EdTech is becoming increasingly more present in higher education and research, progressively more higher education and research institutions claim ownership over the teaching materials and research data. Therefore, union members are concerned to lose their rights on their own research outcomes when moving to work for another institution. The education trade unions also underlined the importance of ensuring the **academic freedom of teachers and researchers** to choose their own material and digital tools. To tackle these issues, some education trade unions reported that their unions set up ad hoc internal committees or working groups on IPR to provide legal advice, training and discussion at national level to reach a common national understanding and practices on IPR.

Education trade unions in Europe firmly oppose the general tendency of governments to push for online learning and teaching to become the “new normal” and agreed that it must remain only an emergency measure. They also underlined that the social aspect of the on-campus activities is an essential component of which higher education cannot be deprived.

ETUCE continues supporting the European education trade unions in their efforts.