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## ETUCE Activity Report on

### Higher education and research

*To BFUG Plenary meeting on 11-12 May 2023, under the Swedish Presidency*

The following report is a summary of ETUCE<sup>1</sup> activities on higher education and research in 2022 and spring 2023.

ETUCE and its member organisations take actions on the issues and challenges specific to the higher education and research sector.

#### ***A sustainable future for higher education is essential, but how?***

*Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC)* is a permanent body of ETUCE representing 45 education trade unions whose membership covers higher education and research staff. HERSC meets twice a year and discusses education trade unions' reactions to higher education and research policies in Europe.

On 1-2 March 2022, the Standing Committee met to discuss the following issues:

- The role of social dialogue in securing decent salaries and working conditions and broadening the bargaining agenda to include the growing issues facing teachers and researchers in higher education.
- The cooperation between higher education, research staff and students in confronting the climate crisis and learning & working conditions. Examples of actions taken by education trade unions in their promotion of sustainable practices include providing training seminars for their members, establishing committees for environment within their organisations, and linking the climate emergency to collective agreements to improve the working conditions of academics.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- The Council conclusions on the [European Universities initiative which was adopted by the Education Council in May.](#)
- The need for increased sustainable funding, more public investment in higher education, and the commercialisation of the sector due to reliance on private funding.
- Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis through promoting research and career development in the higher education and research sector.
- Academic freedom, enhancing support to higher education and research staff, ensuring supportive working environments in higher education and research.

In order to cope with challenges of the future, strong social dialogue in higher education institutes is key. The meeting provided education trade unions with an opportunity to discuss social dialogue for improving the working conditions of academics and quality education. For meaningful social dialogue in place there needs to be sufficient trust between social partners, the capacity to organise, and an extension of the bargaining agenda. In relation to the new [Social Dialogue Work Programme 2022-2023](#) the participants agreed that social dialogue should be used to promote and guarantee sustainable practices and ensure fair working conditions. Social dialogue is essential in combatting the climate crisis.

More information: [here](#)

### ***Trade unions of academics on ensuring the attractiveness of the teaching profession in times of crises***

On 28-29 September 2022, the ETUCE Higher Education and Research Standing Committee met to discuss the impact of the Russian war on Higher Education and Research and ETUCE solidarity actions with Ukrainian member organizations and staff. Trade unions of academics also shared initiatives taken at national level to support Ukrainian academics, researchers, and students. In some EU countries, support has been provided in terms of scholarships to scholars and demanding decent salary for Ukrainian teachers and academics in the host country.

The trade unions of the higher education and research sector workers also discussed about the impact of evolving working condition, privatisation and precarity on health and safety. In this regard, the trade unions of academics considered several psychosocial factors which undermine the health and wellbeing of researchers and teachers in higher educational institutions. Precarity, low job satisfaction, excessive workloads, salary levels, among others, were mentioned. The increase of digitalization in the workplace, due to COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated these problems, challenging the autonomy of the teaching profession and its quality. A further major cause of physical and mental issues is the high workload and pressure on academics and researchers deriving from the obligation to apply for external financial support (eg projects) for the university, due to the lack of public funding. Looking ahead, the trade unions of academics identified practices carried out by European countries to alleviate these issues, such as providing psychological support to the higher education and research sector, ensuring salary protection, guaranteeing transparent careers paths.

The essential role of social dialogue in guaranteeing the attractiveness of the teaching profession was also discussed. The members acknowledged that strike action is a last resort for trade union members to call on national governments and employers to take action. In light of this, the ongoing strike action in the UK, Norway and Kosovo demonstrates the need to strengthen social dialogue. Education trade

unions will continue to lobby governments and academic institutions to secure the rights of workers in higher education during these times of crises

More information: [here](#)

At the next HERSC meeting, which will take place on 7-8 March 2023, the topic of gender equality in higher education will be discussed.

### ***Career development of higher education teachers and researchers and gender equality***



Trade unions of the higher education and research sector workers and representatives of the European Commission discussed the development of two frameworks for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education and research on 7-8 March 2023. Regarding obstacles to quality and sustainable jobs, trade union representatives stressed many challenges concerning the retention of academics and researchers, such as heavy workloads, high number of non-permanent contracts, and a constant fight for permanent funding. This explains the findings of [a survey conducted in Norway](#), which found that only one in five postdocs would advise young people to commit to a career in research. The participants were critical about pursuing mobility and transnational cooperation under the Erasmus scheme, calling for rethinking this type of mobility as it is not meant to address dynamic cooperation between universities. Education trade unions acknowledged that permanent status for researchers, decent salary and working conditions are not guaranteed within or outside academia, for example in for-profit institutes.

As for the need to promote gender equality, experiences from Albania, Sweden and France were presented. Representatives of trade unions from higher education and research acknowledged the existence of similar gender inequality issues in academia in many countries across Europe. [The SHE Figures Study 2021](#) shows that women are under-represented at the highest level in academia and in decision-making positions. Overall, women account for 42.3% of academic staff and only 23.6% of

rectors of higher education institutions are women. Moreover, women are close to reaching gender parity among doctoral graduates but are still under-represented in technical professions. While the ratio of women among doctoral graduates in EU equals to 48.1%, female proportion is lower (24.9%) among self-employed professionals in Science and Engineering and Information and Communication Technologies. In addition, more women work under precarious contracts than their male counterparts. Hence, several disparities exist among men and women such as unequal pay or pensions gaps, difficulty of reconciling work and private life and access to research funding.

In Sweden, a study titled "[Spotlight on gender equality: When insecurity overshadows everything](#)" shows that while the number of women graduates exceeds that of men, this proportion is completely reversed when it comes to attaining full professor status. Likewise, in Albania while women represent 77.9% of the students and academic staff, in the later stages of career, the ratio of women is declining progressively, falling to 69.2% among associate professors and to 50.4% among full professors. The discrepancy in terms of participation of women and men in research, innovation and leadership reflects hidden cultural barriers.

However, progress can be facilitated with the help of actions from governments as in Ireland, where a [Gender Equality Taskforce Action Plan for Higher Education](#) was put in place by the government to help increase the ratio of female university rectors. Therefore, strong social dialogue is needed to facilitate cooperation between education trade unions and governments. Education trade unions will continue to lobby governments and academic institutions to protect workers in higher education, especially to fight against gender inequality and prevent cases of psychosocial risks such as sexual harassment. In this regard, participants stressed the importance of trade unions' involvement and social dialogue in every aspect of governance.

More information: [here](#)

### ***Social dialogue in the Higher Education Sector***



On 28 September 2022, the delegates from the European education trade unions and education employers met for the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue



for Education (ESSDE). Regarding the proposals of the European Commission on setting up a European Framework of sustainable and attractive careers for academics and a European Framework for Research Careers, ETUCE member organisations stressed the problems the academics are facing, e.g. rigid academic careers, lack of parity of esteem, lack of career development, gender gaps, precarious working conditions, insufficient European mobility. It was agreed that these frameworks, as largely affecting the jobs of academics, need to be consulted with the European Sectoral Social Partners for Education. In this regard, ETUCE and EFEE stressed the importance of recognizing the exceptional role of social partners organizations in the consultation process by the European Commission, calling for more effective social dialogue. Finally, trade unions of academics underlined that substantial EU funding is granted to higher education institutions with the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe projects but that these grants are not related to fair employment conditions.

More information: [here](#)

The joint project, “Promoting Quality of Academic Teaching and Management Project” coordinated by the European Sectoral Social Partners for Education (ETUCE and European Federation of Education Employers- EFEE-) aims to continue the work laid out by the European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education Work Programme 2020-2021, which underlines that social partners work together to ensure continuous professional development, gender equality and inclusive, safe and healthy working environments for teachers. Against this background, the social partners in education not only wish to raise awareness on the importance of teaching in higher education but also to encourage and promote a better learning culture and a more positive attitude towards learning for all.

The [Kick-off webinar](#) took place on 14 June 2021, where the role of social dialogue was discussed in relation to improving working conditions for teachers, and reducing precariousness for ensuring quality learning and teaching. During [the hybrid Final Conference](#), which took place on 26-27 April 2022, participants discussed the importance of social dialogue in higher education, and the need for accurate data on the status of academics and researchers. Research supporting the project found that the complexity surrounding social dialogue at institutional and national level had worsened due to unclear social dialogue structures, and different bargaining agendas at different levels. Furthermore, participants put emphasis on the importance of safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom while pointing out that the democratic governance in place in higher education is not always effective and that social dialogue needs to be improved.

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