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## ETUCE Activity Report on

### Higher education and research

*To BFUG Plenary meeting on 1-2 December 2021, under the Slovenian  
Presidency*

The following report is a summary of ETUCE<sup>1</sup> activities on higher education and research in 2021. ETUCE and its member organisations take actions on the issues and challenges specific to the higher education and research sector.

#### ***Precarious employment threatens research and higher education***

*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 19-20 October 2021, the Standing Committee met online to discuss the following issues:

- The threat precarious employment poses to the health and wellbeing of researchers and teachers in higher education institutions.
- The Council conclusions on the [European Universities initiative](#) which was adopted by the Education Council in May 2021.
- The need for 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.

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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 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.

More information: [here](#)

## ***Promoting Quality of Academic Teaching and Management Project (2021-2022)***



The joint 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. The project scope consists of two Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) and four Advisory Group meetings, which provided opportunities for the project partners to exchange best practices, experiences and challenges on this topic. The PLAs are organised in hybrid format, the first of which took place in in [Portugal](#) on 3-4 November 2021, and the second scheduled in the Netherlands in February 2022. In Portugal the focus was on the importance of social dialogue in ensuring high-quality academic teaching, and the need to extend the bargaining agenda. The event was organised by the social partners in the higher education sector in Portugal. This was followed by discussions on the quality assessments of academics. Education trade unions demand that teaching and research assessment should be qualitative not quantitative in order to improve the working conditions of the academics, such as the issue of precariousness. ETUCE member organizations were also concerned that graduate tracking would result in performance-based funding of higher education institutions based on the graduates' employability. These also provide more insight into the higher education systems of each respective country. In addition to the PLAs, Advisory Group will address the

impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the higher education sector and highlighted some key issues that were exacerbated by this European health crisis. The goal is to release a list of Joint Recommendations that are a direct reflection of the lessons learned through these project activities. A more detailed description of the project outcomes, including practical examples that underline the joint recommendations, will be found in the final project report.

### ***The negative impact of potential harmonisation of higher education***

ETUCE published a [position paper on the European Universities Initiative and European Degrees](#). The paper outlines the main concerns relating to the Council conclusions on the [European Universities initiative](#), and the establishment of 41 'European Universities' alliances.

Within the paper ETUCE reminds ministries that quality higher education is not a commodity and the European University Alliances should not change to private university consortiums. Performance-based funding can contribute to the further privatisation and commercialisation of higher education. Education is a public good and it should prepare students to life and jobs, which needs to be supported by quality teaching. Education trade unions of the higher education sector worry that the mobility of academics and researchers, from one university to another can force them to work on temporary contracts and short-term contracts. This process can further increase precariousness in the sector and have a detrimental effect on the health and safety of the teachers and researchers. While it is positive that the European Council recognises the importance of creating "more attractive career and working conditions for researchers and staff", it constitutes a major step back from recognising the value of the teaching profession and the needs of the staff.

ETUCE welcomes that the Council Conclusions invites the EU Members States to "defend and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy". However, as the Council conclusions suggests European University alliances establish "inter-university campuses", ETUCE member organisations are concerned that the autonomy of the institutions will be negatively affected. There is also worry regarding the impact of setting up joint accreditation and quality assurance procedures by the European Alliances as these can have a negative impact on the institutional autonomy and national competence on education, and it seems to be an attempt to harmonize higher education.

### ***ETUCE is concerned about the working conditions for researchers***

On 16 November the ETUCE Committee adopted an [ETUCE Position on Fair working conditions for Researchers](#) to have an impact on the upcoming Council Recommendations on the *Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe*, based on the [Roadmap](#) made available ETUCE believes in the importance of effective social dialogue with education trade unions is especially relevant with regards to the European Research Area (ERA). Researchers' trade unions are concerned that the ERA should not be seen as a "unified research area" which disrespects the existing national structures, regulations and collective agreements on researchers' employment, including their working conditions, contractual situation and pension systems, which is a national competence and falls into the remit of social dialogue with the researchers' trade unions.

Gender equality must also be a priority action of the Pact of Research, and while ETUCE welcomes that the "uneven flow of researchers and brain circulation" was raised in the Council conclusions, it regrets that the Member States were not encouraged to improve the salary of researchers. This is

linked to the deteriorating precariousness of researchers in universities and public research organisations, which has had a detrimental impact on the quality of research and development and innovation. These issues have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The OECD report on [Research precariat](#) outlines the negative impact of precariousness in research both for the academics and wider society. It also outlines that the move away from core basic funding to project-based funding is making research systems increasingly dependent on a cohort of junior staff employed on casual contracts. ETUCE believes that ensuring public investment to public societal research is essential in relation to defining reforms and financial priorities. Sustainable public budget has an impact on the ability of universities as collegial bodies to foster independent basic research, providing short and long-term benefits to society and the economy.

### ***Higher Education cooperation***

ETUCE and its member organisations are concerned for the state of higher education, and therefore responded to the European Commission's recent two call for evidences. ETUCE replied to a call for evidence for two EU initiatives. For the [European Strategy for Universities](#), ETUCE and member organisations namely FUUP (FI), SNESUP-FSU (FR), GEW (DE), FLC-CGIL (IT) replied. For [Building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#), ETUCE and member organisations namely SNESUP-FSU (FR), GEW (DE), FLC-CGIL (IT) replied. Our suggestions for these upcoming EU policies are:

- The European Commission should consider the negative impact of digital teaching during the COVID had on academics and students. The new initiative on universities should focus on effective support to academics, and encourage ministries and higher education institutions to take effective actions to ensure the right to access quality and inclusive higher education for all in line with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- The European Commission should recognise that the harmonisation of higher education institutions is not in line with Art 165 of the EU Treaty, and it would not make European universities more inclusive or effective. It is important to respect that higher education is a human right and public good and that sustainable public investment for higher education institutions needs to be guaranteed.
- Quality higher education should not be seen as commodity. The European Commission should strictly monitor high quality education and inclusivity of the European University Alliances.
- The European Commission should remind the Member States about effective social dialogue with trade unions in the higher education and research sectors. The upcoming initiatives should deal with ensuring the well-being of academics in relation to ensuring high quality teaching and research by asking Member States to guarantee permanent contract, fair working conditions and decent salary of the higher education and research staff.
- The initiative on building bridges should ask the Member States to shift the approach of quantitative assessment of publication of the academics towards more qualitative assessment of teaching and research following effective social dialogue with the education trade unions.

### ***Solidarity with education trade unions of higher education and research staff***

In 2021, following the appointment of a new university president, Professor Melih Bulu, at the Boğaziçi University, by virtue of the Emergency Decree Law No. 673 on 4 January 2021, ETUCE shared its deep



concern at the negative consequences that the Emergency Decree Law implied while replacing the electoral system of rectors with an appointment system. ETUCE regretted that the appointment of Professor Melih Bulu took place without any consultations with academic or administrative staff of the Boğaziçi University and that in turn has led to numerous protests in front of the rector's office.

On 17 May 2021, ETUCE supported the Social Agreement to ensure the development and sustainability of Estonian education signed by Federation of Estonian Student Unions, Estonian Educational Personnel Union, Council of Academic Unions, UNIVERSITAS, Estonian Young Academy of Sciences and Estonian School Students Councils' Union to ensure high quality and accessible education in Estonia. Among other things, the Social Agreement called for an increase in the state funding of the salary fund of general education teachers as well as the state funding of higher education to at least 1.5% of the GDP and for maintaining the funding at least at the same level in the future as well as for free higher education in Estonia as a public good that must ensure general access.

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