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ETUCE Activity Report on

Higher education and research

To BFUG Plenary meeting 24-25 September 2020, Berlin

The following report is a summary of ETUCE¹ activities on higher education and research **between June and October 2020**.

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

The impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education and Research Institutions in Europe



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ETUCE is 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, due in no small part to the prolonged schools closures that were implemented in most European countries, and the transition to distance and/or online education, that has impacted all sectors, including higher education and research. 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).

We also addressed jointly with parents and students' associations our concerns on the reopening of education institutions in our [Joint ETUCE-OBESSU-EPA Statement on COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (May 2020). Additionally, our latest [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. Considering the especially challenging situation of refugees and migrants, ETUCE issued a Statement '[Education Trade Unions in Solidarity with Refugees in Times of COVID-19](#)' (May 2020) demanding to evacuate overcrowded refugee camps with a view to provide safe accommodation for refugees and ensure necessary quarantine and protection from COVID-19. As recently as 25 May, ETUCE Committee

¹ 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.

Members discussed online the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the education sector. Finally, Education International conducted a survey 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).

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

“Skills development must respect holistic education” - discussion on a new ETUCE position on the European Skills Agenda

ETUCE member organizations are discussing on the new European Commission’s [Communication on a "European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience"](#).

Our forthcoming position paper will deal with, among many other issues with the European Commission’s plan to set up a **European Degree, a European University Statute, a and a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System**. As higher education is a national competence, ETUCE members request that these ideas be discussed with the respective ministries of education and education trade unions and national and institutional competence on higher education are respected. It is important that the development of education and skills/competence is primarily considered between the education systems. The European Commission should carry out a fully-fledged research and impact assessment on these proposals.

Concerning the plans on setting up a **European Competence Framework for Researchers, Taxonomy of Skills for Researchers, and developing curricula for researchers** on open science and science management, we underline that national and institutional level competence frameworks and research training programmes should be more accessible to researchers to provide them flexible pathways in academic and non-academic careers. In order to support their career development, initial and continuous training need to be seen from a holistic perspective. PhD students and early career researchers should be equipped to receive trainings on how to prepare for a research work within the university and in the broader labour market if they wish so. While the European Commission addresses the need for competence, skills, and training of researchers towards open science, it should also consider how to foster comprehensive researcher’s career development in line with ensuring better contractual status and working conditions for them. We are concerned that the European level competence framework could be too restrictive and may undermine existing national and institutional frameworks and agreements, including on academic freedom and researchers’ career development. Education trade unions request that the European Commission respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom, including the UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel of 1997² and Art. 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, *“The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected.”*³ Also, the work of researchers should be seen through a more holistic perspective rather than simply a narrow skills agenda. In addition, standards and professional requirements for researchers are subject to national legislation and assessments of researchers’ work need to be in line with collective agreements. At institutional and national level this should part of ongoing debates and initiatives to improve doctoral training and researchers’ careers in a lifelong perspective.

The ETUCE position will be adopted and published in October.

² http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12012P/TXT>

View of the higher education and research staff on micro-credentials

As in recent policy discussions the European Commission brought forward with an increasing intensity the idea of micro-credentials ETUCE in cooperation with ETUC published a position paper in June 2020. One of the problems is the lack of an agreed definition and common understanding on micro-credentials at the European level. The position paper stresses that we support micro-credentials only when they are complementary to full qualifications, quality assured and accredited, when they are recognised as a proof of achievement and not only validated, and they play a role in validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL). They should be validated and recognized by the VET-institutions, cross-sectoral and sectoral trade unions and employers. Micro-credentials should be meaningful and have high quality. They should be based on standards on delivery mode, assessment procedure, and duration, and they should indicate how they link to full qualifications. In the paper we underline the importance of respecting individual academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions which have been under attack from labour market demands and public budget cuts, which force universities to seek additional funding, often by providing short-term courses for the labour market. We echo the concerns of the OECD Education Director Andreas Schleicher who said that the increasing digitalisation of learning and the development of micro credentials—short online courses that provide students with a digital certification or a “badge” when complete—would see *universities’ power in education decrease*⁴.

More information: [here](#)

Graduate tracking – the view of the higher education and research staff

ETUCE in cooperation with ETUC published a position paper in June 2020 in relation to the European Commission’s working group on graduate tracking systems which was established following Council [Recommendation on tracking graduates](#) in November 2017. Concerning the introduction of a European-level graduate tracking survey by the European Commission, ETUCE believes that such a survey among higher education students may have negative impact on **institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions**. We recall the Paris Communique which stressed that “Academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education form the backbone of the European Higher Education Area”.

More information: [here](#)

⁴ Speech at the Education World Forum in London on 21 January, 2019
<https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-agencies-other-2019-micro-credentials-threaten-universities-says-oecd-director/>

Higher education and research staff are concerned to protect academic freedom and working conditions in public-private partnerships

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 29-30 September 2020, the Standing Committee will meet in Brussels to discuss the following issues:

- The impact of the COVID-19 crisis to the higher education and research sector and staff
- Academic freedom in the Bologna Process
- EU development on Tracking graduates of higher education, presented by the European Commission
- European policy work on Micro-credentials in higher education, presented by the European Commission
- Trade union renewal in the higher education and research sector took place on the first day, linked to ETUCE's ongoing [YOUR TURN! project](#)

More information: [here](#)

Higher education and research in European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education

ETUCE, as a recognised social partner at the European level, is committed to enhancing and strengthening social dialogue at European, national, regional and local level. The European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) gathers national delegates from ETUCE and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) member organisations in order to debate, identify and promote common viewpoints at the European level. At the annual [Plenary meeting](#) of the ESSDE in December 2019, the European sectoral social partners in education adopted the [Joint ETUCE/EFEE Guidelines](#) and [Quality Framework](#) on the effective integration of migrants and refugees in the education sector, and a [Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on Citizenship Education and EU Common Values](#), taking into account the view of the higher education and research too.

At a second ESSDE meeting on 26 June 2020 the education social partners adopted the [Joint ETUCE/EFEE Statement on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on sustainable education systems at times of crisis and beyond](#). The Joint Statement commits the social partners to a comprehensive vision to support education systems in the COVID-19 recovery, including in the area of Higher Education and Research. In this regard, ETUCE and EFEE agree on the need for quality working environments for online or blended teaching, which support high-quality education and enable students to engage in meaningful learning processes, and to

work towards the continuation of international mobility programmes. The Statement calls policy makers to acknowledge and recognise the large contribution that researchers and academic staff, and early career researchers in particular, are giving to research, development and innovation. It calls to promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy, in order to ensure universities' ability as collegial bodies to foster basic research, including in areas such as health, the environment, and social sciences, with the potential to offer long-term benefits for society and the economy.

Sustainable funding in higher education and research

Ensuring public funding to higher education is a crucial part of ETUCE work at the European level. The economic crisis and the ensuing creation of the European Economic Governance Coordination mechanism (European Semester) and Europe 2020 Framework have led to the increasing influence on the European coordination mechanism on national socio-economic policies, including on public higher education and research.

ETUCE closely follows the process and various mechanisms of Economic and Social Governance, and more specifically the evolutions of the European Semester both as a system of economic governance and as a process of policy coordination, including in the education and training field.

In December 2019, the new European Commission launched the new growth model paradigm of competitive sustainability, built around the European Green Deal and putting sustainability at the center of the strategy so that citizens' well-being is at the center of economic policy and governance. "*Investment in cutting-edge research and innovation*", using the full flexibility of the next EU budget, to be focusing on the areas with the greatest potential (e.g. clean asset, energy efficiency, etc) are a policy priority for environmental sustainability. Moreover, a "*forward-looking research and innovation strategy*" is deemed essential to raise Europe's productivity. In this regards, the European Commission calls for structural reforms aimed at fostering the spread of innovation and improving access to finance to enable more firms to benefit from innovation, as well as to support public and private investment in innovative/digital technologies to foster the creation of new goods, services and business models. Ahead of the publication of the Annual Sustainability Growth Strategy 2020, ETUCE, as education social partner, addressed the European Commission with the [education priorities for the year to come](#). Therein, ETUCE recognizes that the creation and transmission of knowledge through research and innovation is an important engine to advance productivity and future growth. However, underinvestment from the public sector, reform pressures to better align university outcomes and governance to the needs and wishes of business, as well as financial incentives to steer research to business priorities risk undermining academic freedom, as well as the ability of universities as collegial bodies to foster basic research, including in such areas as the environment and social sciences, with the potential to curb long-term benefits for society and the economy. In March 2020, ETUCE published a thematic overview and comment on the [European Commission's 2020 Country Reports in the education and training field, a component](#) of the 2020 Winter Package of the 2020 European Semester process. ETUCE raised concerns about the worrying levels of inequity in education systems resulting from public underinvestment, low attractiveness of the teaching profession and a narrow focus on the marketable aspects

of education. In light of the COVID-19 outbreak that has impacted all schools across Europe, ETUCE additionally recalled the importance of ensuring free, quality, public education for all, renewing the demands addressed to the Joint Council meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council and the Education Council held in Brussels on 8 November 2019. ETUCE called Ministers to “[Turn the tide: Invest in education](#)”, by increasing public investment in education and safeguarding the public provision and governance of education from the influence and grasp of private sector investment and actors to protect the broad, essential mission of education and of democracy. The Country Specific Recommendations 2020’s focus on investment on the green and digital transition recognise the importance of boosting research and innovation in almost half of EU countries. Unfortunately, they fall short of identifying quality education as a key area to focus investment on, despite data⁵ shows that education funding in Europe has been falling for years, decreasing an average of 8% for non-tertiary levels and by 4% at tertiary level, causing damage to equality and social mobility, and hampering growth.

ETUCE urges for enhanced public investment, academic freedom, and fair working conditions in higher education and research through a dynamic three-way process: 1, by informing ETUCE member organisations on their opportunities to influence the process of the European policy coordination and governance (e.i. through the European Semester), 2, by raising the awareness of policy-makers at national and European level on education workers’ viewpoints on these issues and 3, by promoting social partners’ effective involvement in the use, management and governance of EU funds in the area of higher education and research, as to increase transparency, democratic governance, and to ensure that resources effectively meets those who are most in need, so as to address challenges of equity and equality in higher education systems across Europe. To boost its demands, ETUCE has run an [action week campaign](#) #InvestInEducation! In April 2020, calling for public investment in quality education as Europe looked to reopen after Covid-19.

Gender equality in higher education

Among other sectors in ETUCE [Project](#) Social dialogue and gender equality: Empowering education trade unions to address gender equality in the teaching profession through social dialogue with the following outcomes: a [leaflet](#) on gender equality, a [research report](#) on gender equality, including higher education and research sector, and an [Online Database of Good Practices on Gender Equality](#). The main policy outcome of the project is an updated [ETUCE Action Plan on Gender Equality](#), which focuses on all sectors, including issues specific for Higher Education and Research. A video [Education Trade Unions for the Teaching Profession: Let’s Talk About Gender Equality!](#) has been developed in the framework of the project with a view to be used by education trade unions to promote their role in addressing gender equality issues in the education sector, teaching profession and society as a whole.

⁵ OECD (2019), Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en> and Eurostat (2019), European Pillar of Social Rights indicators, General government expenditure by function, [TEPSR_SP110]

Learning and practicing democracy and active citizenship in higher education

In its [reaction](#) to the proposed roadmap for European Democracy Action Plan, ETUCE demanded a much more prominent and multi-dimensional place for education in the Action Plan as education plays a crucial role in preparing open-minded, critical thinking, reflective and active citizens who care about their society, the world and environment they live in, and future generations. The Statement also calls for a holistic perspective on education systems instead of a sole focus on the labour market needs, while linking the European Democracy Action Plan to the European Education and Training Strategy. ETUCE also highlights that practicing democracy and active citizenship requires a clear vision of the whole education institution, based on democratic culture and democratic governance, safe and open learning, teaching and research environment, dialogue and constructive discussions, respect for the freedoms of opinion and expression, and on participatory approaches among all education actors.

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