ETUCE Report to the BFUG Plenary meeting
5-6 November, 2026

ETUCE member organisations adopted the following Call to the Ministerial Conference:

Academics unite for safe and inclusive quality higher education

Call to Ministers of the Bologna Process
For the Iasi-Chisinau Ministerial Conference, May 2027

Adopted by ETUCE Higher Education and Research Standing Committee on 5 March 2026

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) is a federation of 120 education trade unions in 48 countries, representing in total 4,9 million members all over Europe, including academics and researchers. It is the European Region of Education International. ETUCE is a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group of the European Higher Education Area of the Bologna Process countries.

Since the Tirana Ministerial Conference in May 2024, we have seen growing threats to the core values and goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Higher education and research are key to social, cultural, economic, and political development. We know that major societal and climatic challenges elevate the importance of collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. However, austerity, authoritarianism, and automation are increasingly threatening the EHEA, higher education and research personnel, and the essential quality of higher education.

Societal and political polarisation and the emergence of authoritarian regimes and governance have contributed to attacks on higher education institutions, researchers, and teachers in many countries. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are vital pillars of strong democracies and social development, enabling freedom of expression, open and critical discussions, mutual trust and sustainable development. This is now under attack. There is growing evidence that artificial intelligence (AI) is having a disruptive impact on academic work and student learning. While offering new opportunities, there is a severe risk of lower quality and an increasing mistrust in science and knowledge due to AI and the digital transformation in general.

Attacks on institutional autonomy, on academic freedom, on staff and students are not acceptable. Member organisations of the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) which represents staff in the higher education and research sector in 49 countries, call for our higher education institutions

to be safe and inclusive spaces for quality education and research - places where knowledge can flourish and ideas flow freely among staff and students regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or their cultural and socio-economic background. This is vital to uphold democracy and equality and to build bridges across borders.

We reaffirm the objective of the Rome Communique: to build a more inclusive, innovative, interconnected, and resilient EHEA. Governments and higher education institutions must enable and support every student to progress to the best of their ability by equipping them with the knowledge, competence, skills, and attitudes needed for active citizenship in a rapidly changing society.

To do so, governments must increase public investment and funding in higher education and research and ensure staff are properly valued and supported. Academic careers must be attractive to all teachers and researchers. This means investing in attractive working conditions and staff development for academics and researchers, thus ending underfunding, casualisation, heavy workloads, and declining salaries for such staff.

Academics across EHEA unite for quality education and research. We welcome the commitments in the Tirana Communique to revise the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), to make sure it is a supportive, robust and transparent instrument for quality assurance of teaching and learning. ESG is important for mutual trust and recognition, and a framework that sets standards for quality assurance agencies and quality assurance activities. However, it must be supplemented with goals and standards that constitute the core elements of quality education and research: academic freedom, collegial governance, sustainable funding and working conditions of staff, and the importance of the teacher-student relationship.

We encourage the Ministerial Conference to take inspiration from international recommendations and frameworks such as the UN High Level Panel on the Teaching profession (2024) and the Santiago Consensus (2025), both of which underline the key role of teachers' and teacher unions' active involvement in policy development and implementation. By allowing teachers and researchers to be drivers of transformation in higher education, and by recognizing the importance of systemic social dialogue and collegial governance, EHEA will be in a much better position to achieve its core vision and to meet the challenges ahead.

In the run up to the 2027 Iasi-Chisinau Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process countries, we call on ministers to commit to the following goals in the forthcoming Communique:

- Assert the **EHEA as a safe and supportive place for quality teaching and learning** distinguished by critical thinking and democracy, equity, inclusion and solidarity, cultural exchange, knowledge sharing and understanding, free from coercion, polarisation, and harassment.

- Protect, strengthen and guarantee **academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and other fundamental values** such as freedom of knowledge, science, and speech, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education**,** and ensure they are effectively monitored nationally and across the EHEA with structured involvement of the staff and their trade unions in the process.

- Guarantee sustainable and long-term **public investment and funding** in higher education and research to ensure high quality education and research across all fields of knowledge and a supportive working and learning environment for staff and students.

- Recognise the **student-teacher relationship** as a permanent, key constituent of higher education institutions and reaffirm the crucial role of teaching staff in supporting high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching.

- Prioritise **decent working conditions and well-being** that increase the attractiveness of the academic profession by guaranteeing to all staff permanent contracts, decent salaries**,** fair pension and provision and opportunities for professional development and innovation throughout the academic career.

- Ensure a **human-centred, ethical, and rights-based approach to AI** – one that ensures transparency, mitigates bias, protects privacy, respects academic freedom and intellectual property, and safeguards educational equity and quality.

- Strengthen **collaboration** among institutions, staff and students, enforce democratic participation; establish transparent and systemic mechanisms for effective and structural **social dialogue and collegial governance;** involve the academics in shaping and transforming higher education both within EHEA and at national and institutional level.

This Call is available here: Academics unite for safe and inclusive quality higher education - European Trade Union Committee for Education

The following national trad euniosn of academics have joint already to the Call:

THE NETHERLANDS - Call of AOB
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NORWAY - Call of NAR
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UNITED KINGDOM - Call of UCU
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NORWAY - Call of UEN
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Academic trade unions worry about growing threats to academic freedom, shrinking public investment, and increasing commercialisation

On 14-15 October, Higher Education and Research Standing Committee of ETUCE was hosted by SNCS-FSU in CNRS Regional Office in Villejuif/Paris, France.

The meeting focused on a common concern across Europe: the declining attractiveness of academic careers and the need to defend higher education and research as a public good. Academic trade unions discussed growing threats to academic freedom, shrinking public investment, increasing managerialism and commercialisation, deteriorating working conditions, and the erosion of meaningful social dialogue. Participants from several countries highlighted that these trends are undermining the quality of teaching and research and weakening the social mission of universities. The meeting also examined UNESCO's work on academic and scientific freedom, the revision of the **UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel**, the future of early-stage researchers, and preparations for the 2027 Bologna Process Ministerial Conference.

The participants agreed that there is an urgent need for **more public investment in higher education and research sectors, job creation and stable employment**, and **to end the excessive precarity**. Trade unions reported widespread reliance on fixed-term contracts, difficulties in career progression, salary losses, and insufficient research funding. Participants stressed that permanent work should be supported by permanent funding, that academic freedom cannot exist without employment security, and that early-stage researchers should be recognised as employees with full labour and social protection rights. **Collective bargaining and social dialogue** were repeatedly identified as essential tools to improve salaries, working conditions, career prospects, and participation of academic staff in university governance. Trade unions also emphasised the importance of defending the right to organise, strengthening collective agreements, ensuring equal pay and non-discrimination, improving mental health and well-being, and protecting staff from excessive managerial control and negative impacts of digitalisation and the use of AI.

Trade unions of European academics and researchers expressed their solidarity towards the French higher education students and staff for their fight for sufficient public budget whose demands include:

- Our students' demands are our own! - As 50% of students skip meals because of lack of money.
- Repeal of Parcoursup! Creation of sufficient university places! – As thousands of young people in France remain without a higher education place each year.
- Job creation in universities! – As French universities have lost thousands of jobs while student numbers have increased.
- Gender pay equality! - As female university employees earn significantly less than men on average
- 20% increase in the value of the index point! - As public-sector salaries have lost more than 20% of their purchasing power in France.
- Immediate release of €1 billion to welcome students rejected by Parcoursup! - As hundreds of thousands of candidates do not receive the higher education place they requested.