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# ETUCE

## European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

### ETUCE Position on the

### Fair working condition of researchers is key for the

### European Research Area

*Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 15-16 November 2021*

#### Background

On 30 September 2020, the European Commission published a Communication on [A new European Research Area \(ERA\) for Research and Innovation](#). The aim of the European Commission was to summarize the achievements of the European Research Area while celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> year after its establishment, and present 14 initiatives to encourage more research and innovation investment, synchronize the level of quality of science in the EU, strengthen the relationship between research and industries, and achieve gender equality in research and development. The Communication also asked for more national investment to research and development to ensure the economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

Within this policy initiative the European Commission announced the set-up of the so-called “*Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe*” (later: *Pact*) which would ensure the governance process of the new ERA “with regular political dialogue with Member States addressing priorities, implementation strategies and progress monitoring towards the realisation of the set objectives.” As the European Commission explains it, “The Pact would consolidate in one single document the most relevant principles for ERA currently dispersed (for example, the European Charter for Researchers, the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, Council conclusions on advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area, Bonn Declaration on scientific freedom).”

In order to shape the Council Recommendations on the Pact for Research and Innovation, the European Commission launched a [public consultation](#) which was open until 13 May 2021. It asked feedback on a [Roadmap](#) which explains the European Commission’s policy on a **Proposal for a Council Recommendation** which is to be published in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2021.

In addition, the Competitiveness Council adopted a [Council conclusions on Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality](#) on 28 May 2021.

The below position is the view of ETUCE, which represents education staff in all education sectors including the higher education and research staff in 51 countries, to the European Commission’s [Roadmap](#) and [Council conclusions on Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality](#). The response is in line with the [ETUCE Position on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation](#) which was

consulted with the Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC) and adopted by the ETUCE Bureau on 3 November 2020.

1. The [OECD policy report published in May 2021 on “Reducing the precarity of academic research careers”](#) highlights that the **precariousness** of researchers in universities and public research organisations has been worsening and that this has had a detrimental impact on the quality of research and development and innovation. In addition to this, the **COVID-19 pandemic** has decreased the career prospects of postdoctoral researchers and is having a detrimental effect on their wellbeing. According to OECD, younger researchers are more likely to be affected by precarity and by the negative effects of the pandemic in this regard. Furthermore, female researchers are disproportionately affected by these conditions and many “drop out” during the transition from early to midcareer. There are also concerns about the diversity of the researcher workforce as a whole, and a perception that only those researchers from privileged backgrounds can afford prolonged precarity. There are earlier studies indicating that the precariousness of researchers reduces the quality of research, as they are given less time to carry out their research and to produce ground-breaking work in the long term. Rather, there is a strong pressure on them to publish short articles within a limited time. These are serious problems especially in the light of decreasing or non-existing **social dialogue** during the COVID-19 crisis in several European countries as a result of governments having adopted an emergency status.
2. ETUCE member organisations have [recently discussed](#) that in the post-pandemic recovery re-establishing **effective social dialogue** with education trade unions needs to be one of the most important actions. We welcome that the Competitiveness Council admitted the problems of the “increasing trend towards precariousness of employment in academia, loss of talent and reduction of job security in many countries”. While we warmly welcome that the Council aims to support **better working conditions** of the researchers and their “inclusive and supportive working environment”, we regret that the Council conclusions in relation to **career development and working conditions of researchers** were discussed and adopted with no or very limited consultation with the European and national researchers’ trade unions, despite the fact that these issues fall under social dialogue and the work of researchers’ trade unions.
3. We are against seeing the ERA as “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 (impacted by the [RESAVER](#) instrument) which is a national competence and falls into the remit of **social dialogue** with the researchers’ trade unions. ETUCE believes that a truly inclusive and fair new Education Research Area (ERA) needs to be developed in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, starting from involving the researchers themselves in the **governance**. ETUCE regrets that **social dialogue** with researchers’ trade unions on developing the new ERA has been lacking.
4. The principles that the Pact for Research and Innovation plans to strengthen, such as freedom of scientific research, the pursuit of excellence and socio-economic valorisation, gender equality, open

access, career conditions for researchers, and the Codes and Charters<sup>1</sup> mentioned in the Roadmap have direct impact on researchers' **daily work and working conditions**. We remind that these Codes and Charters were developed with European-level and national researchers' trade unions. Thus, we urge the European Commission to mention in the *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Pact for Research and Innovation* that each EU country shall effectively involve researchers' trade unions in all key decisions on the future development of the ERA and the Pact. We also urge that their implementation at national level, including setting up and monitoring the **national Research & Innovation strategies** is in line with the Codes and Charters as these strategies can have an impact on researchers' working conditions. The European Commission's work on merging these Codes and Charters into the Pact for Research and Innovation needs to respect already existing national and institutional frameworks and agreements, including **collective agreements on researchers' career development** and safeguard **institutional autonomy and academic freedom** in line with the *UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel of 1997*<sup>2</sup>, the *Art. 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU*<sup>3</sup>, and *Council of Europe Recommendation 1762 (2006) on Academic freedom and university autonomy*<sup>4</sup>.

5. Trade unions representing researchers believe that re-enforcing research and innovation in Europe can be achieved by sustainable **public investment in public research, respect of academic freedom and freedom of research, gender equality, fair working conditions, decent salary and the permanent contractual status** of researchers and early-stage researchers, and effective **social dialogue** with the researchers' trade unions. The European Commission should involve the trade unions of researchers in the European level **governance** of the Pact and encourage the EU member states to ensure the involvement of researchers' trade unions to the national governance on research and innovation strategies. We ask the European Commission to involve ETUCE in developing a "**taxonomy of Skills for researchers**". We remind them that the [OECD policy report on "Reducing the precarity of academic research careers"](#) underlines that increasing **competition for research funds** rather than ground-breaking research outcomes, **high mobility of the researchers, and quantitative research assessment** have a serious impact on the contractual situation and working conditions of researchers and on the quality of research.
6. We consider it positive that the Council asked the Member States to **review research assessment methods** to be more qualitative, which has been demanded by the researchers' trade unions. However, national decision makers should ensure the effective involvement of the research trade unions in such a revision as research assessment has an impact on the contractual situation, working conditions and salary of researchers. We ask the European Commission to involve researchers' trade unions in monitoring the research career trajectories and the implementation of the Council conclusions at national levels. We welcome that the Council conclusions ask to strengthen skills intelligence which can

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<sup>1</sup> European Charter for Researchers, the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, Council conclusions on advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area, Bonn Declaration on scientific freedom

<sup>2</sup> [Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel \(unesco.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Article 13 - Freedom of the arts and sciences | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [PACE - Recommendation 1762 \(2006\) - Academic freedom and university autonomy \(coe.int\)](#)

feed into policy development in relation to researchers' careers, as the OECD also confirmed that there is not enough information available on research precarity.

7. ETUCE emphasises that **gender equality** must be a priority action of the Pact of Research as women remain systematically underrepresented in research and innovation across Europe. According to EU data, only 33.4% of researchers are women, and the gender gap worsens in the sector of Sciences, Technologies, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), where women represent only 21% of the total researchers. Also, [gender distribution at different stages of academic careers](#) shows that there are fewer women in higher career stages. In addition to being an essential human right to be protected, gender equality in research, particularly in the STEM sector, is also recognised as being crucial to ensure high-quality research and innovation (R&I). ETUCE remarks that it is not enough that the European Commission only highlights the importance of gender balance in the new ERA, but in addition the Commission should present concrete and targeted measures to counter gender inequality in research and in the STEM sector. Therefore, ETUCE underlines the need for targeted initiatives to ensure gender equality in the sector, including supportive financial measures that must be developed based on updated data and with the involvement of trade unions of researchers.
8. The COVID-19 crisis had a detrimental impact on the researchers and research in both the public and private research sectors. While their trade unions negotiated hard for employers to acknowledge that research carried out remotely during the lock-down be recognised as work, many researchers were still laid off or threatened with unemployment. As the pandemic caused the closing of many research laboratories and impeded the fieldwork, the research progress was often delayed by increased worsening researchers' working conditions and precariousness. ETUCE member organisations worry for those researchers who are not allowed to work remotely by their employers in the pandemic and for those whose **health and safety conditions** are not ensured in the workplaces. ETUCE also stresses the difficult situation of those researchers who combined the research activity with academic teaching during the pandemic and who experienced unsustainable work-life balance and higher mental distress due to the increased workload during the online and hybrid teaching. National research and innovation strategies cannot be successful when researchers are facing such difficulties, which have a negative impact on the quality of research and on the well-being, creativity and innovativeness of researchers. Therefore, the *Pact for Research and Innovation* should support the recovery of Europe from a social perspective and guarantee good working conditions for the researchers. In order to ensure adequate "geographical, intersectoral and interdisciplinary **mobility** of researchers", it is essential that health and safety and good working conditions of researchers are prioritised by national governments especially in the COVID crisis. Furthermore, increased mobility must not contribute to a rise of precariousness in the sector. We welcome that the "uneven flow of researchers and brain circulation" was raised in the Council conclusions, but we regret that the Member States were not encouraged within that document to improve the **salary of researchers**.
9. Ensuring **public investment** to public societal research is essential in relation to defining reforms and financial priorities to accelerate the green and digital transition in Research and Innovation. Underinvestment of the public sector, business orientation, growing reform pressures to better align university outcomes and governance to the business needs, as well as financial incentives steering research and funding to business priorities undermine the freedom of researchers to conduct ambitious and potentially ground-breaking long-term research without interference. These kinds of narrow-minded policies do not respect the Codes and Charters on Researchers and Research Integrity, including

the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers and are likely to reduce the competitiveness of the ERA and the European Union as a whole. Sustainable public budget has an impact on the ability of universities as collegial bodies to foster **independent basic research** including in such areas as health, the environment and social sciences, providing short and long-term benefits to society and the economy. It is essential that the Pact guarantees sustainable public investment to public research, academic freedom, freedom of knowledge and research, freedom of expression, and institutional autonomy. We point out that the ERA will not be internationally competitive unless universities and other research institutions have access to sufficient, predictable, and long-term public funding that respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom and by doing so makes it possible to take risks and aim at ground-breaking research.

10. The *Pact for Research and Innovation* must ensure that 5% of national public R&D funding be allocated to joint EU programmes and that European partnerships by 2030 do not reduce national investment to public research. The aims of the ERA, and the Pact for Research and Innovation within, should not serve as a “single market for research and innovation”, as such a policy would only suit the fast production of incremental improvements, this policy turns research fully into a commodity and hampers ambitious basic research that the long-term competitiveness of the ERA and the European Union really depends on. We do not agree that the European Commission’s policy motivates more **business-research partnerships** and plans to make the ERA to rely on “sustainable funding” of companies. Only public funding and endowments can be the sources of sustainable funding as companies act according to their own always changing commercial interests. ETUCE is concerned that such a policy encourages further **marketisation and commercialisation** in higher education and research instead of respecting academic freedom of researchers and institutional autonomy of universities and fostering ambitious long-term research. Therefore, the Council Recommendations on the Pact for Research and Innovation should ask the EU countries to ensure sustainable public budgets for public R&I, respect the value of academic freedom of research and the role of social dialogue with researchers on their career development and working conditions.
11. We recall the *UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017)*<sup>5</sup> which clearly underlines that academic freedom in relation to open communication of the results, hypotheses and opinions are the core of the scientific process. We call on the European Commission to acknowledge that seeing research from an economic perspective does not at all support the principles of **academic freedom and open science**. While it is important that the Pact for Research recognises the role of open access in research, ETUCE member organisations remark that researchers are undergoing growing pressures from their employers who claim ownership over the researchers’ findings. ETUCE underlines that this has a detrimental impact on researchers’ incentives, researchers’ career perspectives, and research quality. At the same time researchers are in the best position to understand the commercial potential of their own research. ETUCE therefore, urges that the Pact for Research include adequate measures to protect the **intellectual property of researchers’ rights** to their research work.

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<sup>5</sup> [Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/recommendation-on-science-and-scientific-researchers)