



ETUCE Statement

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Brexit: education trade unions remain united for quality education across Europe

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After nearly four years of uncertainty, political turmoil, and a series of setbacks, the [Withdrawal Agreement](#) was signed on 24 January 2020. The United Kingdom has now left the European Union and entered the transition period. This historic event has already had a profound impact on the lives of millions of citizens on both sides of the English Channel – and it will continue to do so. When it comes to working people, Brexit raises concerns for all sectors throughout Europe and notably the education community. Little is known yet about the future relationship between the UK and the EU, but Brexit imperils a partnership which was decades in the making, and has brought the education sector considerable benefits, including opportunities in mobility and research programmes, which have enabled millions of teachers, trainers, researchers, and students to enrich their professional paths with international learning, training, or work experience.

ETUCE [has previously voiced](#) the concerns of education personnel about the potentially damaging impact of Brexit for the education sector, and now urges UK and EU leaders to work hand in hand to mitigate the adverse consequences. The two sides must ensure close cooperation between all parties to protect the rights of workers, students, and citizens alike. ETUCE, on behalf of its 131 Member Organisations across the European region, emphasises that Brexit's impact can stretch far and wide. The education sector is particularly marked by multicultural and international cooperation. Its workers, and their rights, cannot become a bargaining chip nor a footnote in any future agreement between the EU and the UK.

ETUCE hereby highlights its concerns and advocates for cautious reflection on these points, from both negotiating parties, with close consultation of trade unions. It is vital to ensure education workers, and the whole education community, do not endure reduced rights and diminished opportunities. Access to quality education is a right for everyone, and an essential feature of thriving, equal and fair societies. No political confrontation is worth endangering this principle.

A. Transition period and beyond: Education trade unions call for lawmakers' commitment to pre-existing social rights and standards

- 1. European citizens' quality of life must not decline due to Brexit.** Lawmakers must make a strong commitment, from both a political and technical standpoint. When it comes to the education sector, this entails that **Brexit must not negatively impact the quality of education in Europe.**
- 2. Access to quality education is an unalienable right.** This is a fundamental truth, not just idle words. Indeed, all EU Member States and the UK have committed to Sustainable Development Goal 4, pledging to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* As Europe enters this intricate stage of the Brexit negotiations, ETUCE recalls the cornerstones of quality and inclusive education: **adequate public investment in education; an attractive teaching profession with fair employment and working conditions; quality initial training and continuous professional development; meaningful social dialogue.** With this in mind, ETUCE insists that education workers across Europe must not see their social rights and working conditions worsened as a consequence of Brexit.
- 3. The development of the European social model has made possible European-wide improvements in employment and working conditions, with the recognised intention to achieve upwards social convergence among Member States.** While much is still to be improved, **this progress must not be undone**, in particular for workers in the UK. This is why ETUCE urges both negotiating parties to commit to a **non-regression clause** after the transition period, thus ensuring that these hard-won social standards **remain a floor, not a ceiling.**

4. From 1 February until at least 31 December¹ 2020, the EU-UK relationship will have entered a transition period. During these 11 months, both parties are expected to negotiate the political, legal and technical provisions of a future deal framing their future relationship. ETUCE welcomes that this transition period **maintains the status quo for citizens who live or work in another Member State**.
5. While the negotiations should advance at pace, the matters at hand are too critical for rash decisions. Should the negotiations not have reached the desired stage by 1 July 2020, the UK and the EU should **agree to extend the transition period accordingly in order to ensure that the process of formalising their future relationship is not rushed**. A hasty negotiation would undoubtedly impact the quality of the eventual Brexit deal.
6. In particular, ETUCE recalls that should no extension be consented by both parties before 1st July 2020, and should no future deal on the future relationship or extension to the transition period be adopted by both parties by 31 December 2020, the United Kingdom will become a third party with no formally agreed relationship with the EU. This outcome would essentially **result in a no-deal Brexit, disavowed by the great majority of trade unions, political and economic experts, and business leaders alike**.
7. Indeed, such a no-deal Brexit would result in considerable disruption to the lives of millions of citizens and endanger economic relations, **thus impacting, first and foremost, European workers**. It is in the best interest of European workers and citizens that the UK and the EU continue to work together for **prosperous, sustainable, fair and equal societies**.
8. Therefore, ETUCE advocates for a future relationship between the UK and the EU which is based on commitments to **quality education systems, high social and environmental standards, quality jobs, sustained public investment, equal opportunities and non-discrimination**. At a time when European countries are facing unprecedented challenges, such as rising inequalities, radicalisation and xenophobia, migration crises, the digital transformation, and climate change, a **common effort is the only way to face them**.

B. Cross-border educational opportunities enrich European people's learning and working experiences: they must be sustained post-transition period

9. Mobility programmes have long been hailed as some of the EU's most successful initiatives. The education sector is at its best when it **fosters multicultural learning and engagement**. The opportunities in programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon2020 have allowed millions of education staff and students to participate in European and international exchanges, **with an invaluable positive impact on their job prospects and future or current careers**.
10. Furthermore, such experiences can be life-changing, especially for **individuals who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to study or work abroad**. Beyond the purely educational and professional value of mobility programmes, their beneficiaries meet and interact with people from many social groups, increasing their engagement with global issues and their acceptance of cultural diversity. Maintaining these opportunities must be a priority, **particularly at a time when populism, racism and xenophobia threaten the very core of our multicultural societies**.
11. As it stands, mobility programmes and European-funded projects in the UK or involving UK partners are to continue throughout the duration of the transition period. However, **the future participation of the UK in these initiatives is still uncertain**. ETUCE is convinced that UK participation is in the interest of both parties, and **urges them to prioritise their continuity during the negotiations**.
12. Few sectors rely on mobility opportunities and cross-border cooperation as much as the higher education and research sector. As a force for progress and development in our societies, **academic staff should suffer no hindrance to cooperating with colleagues abroad, and working and studying in other countries**. In particular,

¹ The transition period can be extended once for a period of up to one or two years, if both sides agree to this before 1 July 2020.

ETUCE advocates for the protection of **the freedom of movement, vital for millions of workers**, including in the higher education and research sector.

13. Higher education and research systems in European countries have been subjected to **reduced investment in infrastructure and projects**. Academic staff across the continent continue to suffer from **salary freezes and increased workload**. As such, the higher education and research sector has come to partially rely on funding through European funds. **ETUCE calls for these funding opportunities to be sustained** for the higher education and research sector in the UK, and **warns against the replacement of these publicly funded programmes by private funds and public-private partnerships or higher fees for students, which would further endanger the inclusiveness of higher education and research**.
14. After decades of ever closer cooperation, cross-border working and living in European countries has been, in part, made possible by the **recognition of workers' qualifications**. The seminal European Directive on Recognition of Professional Qualification (2005/36/EC) has facilitated the mobility of talents across Europe, including education professionals, and should the UK and the EU not agree on a similar system for the recognition of qualifications, **these professionals' livelihoods would be severely endangered**.

C. Meaningful consultation of education trade unions is vital to establish a solid foundation for the future relationship between the UK and the EU

15. The aforementioned concerns are set to have consequences for the living and working conditions of education professionals in the UK, the EU and beyond. As such, any negotiation concerning them **must include the meaningful consultation of education workers' representatives**. Education trade unions can offer a unique and valuable insight into the views of education professionals on **issues pertaining to education at all levels**. They must **be meaningfully consulted whenever the negotiations address topics related to education**.
16. ETUCE and its national Member Organisations are thus committed to **closely monitoring the progress of the Brexit negotiations** and will play their role as **advocates for a close and reciprocal relationship between the UK and the EU**.
17. Challenges faced by education professionals share many similarities across the European Union. These have been discussed at European-level, and ways to face up these challenges have been uncovered through **facilitated peer-learning and strengthened cooperation**, in the context of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE). The **well-documented positive outcomes of the ESSDE** have, since its inception, **benefited from the participation of United Kingdom colleagues**. The ETUCE calls for **a careful consideration of the benefits of the European Social Partnership** for education social partners during the negotiations.

D. Northern Ireland, Gibraltar and other border territories

18. While all European regions will be impacted by Brexit **and would profit from a close and mutually beneficial future relationship**, **none are more at the forefront of potentially negative consequences than Ireland, Northern Ireland, Gibraltar, and other border territories**. With decades of, in the case of the Irish Border, seemingly invisible separation, and peaceful and prosperous exchanges, a hard border would surely result in chaos with potentially devastating consequences for these regions.
19. **ETUCE fully supports its Member Organisations in these regions, and advocates for the maintenance of open borders and free movement** between Northern Ireland and Ireland, Gibraltar and Spain and other British Territories and EU Member States.

ETUCE reiterates that education workers across Europe will not be divided. They will continue to **work in solidarity, for quality and inclusive education, social justice and sustainable societies**. Education trade unions across Europe stand firmly united, convinced that **knowledge and education know no frontiers**.