

# **ESU's position on sustainable and attractive academic careers**

## I. General remarks about the spring 2024 higher education package

ESU welcomes the ambitious developments on the topics put forward in the spring 2024 higher education package, especially in the light of creating an enabling framework for a shared understanding and implementation of EEA, as well as the several rounds of consultations organised by the Commission in this regard. Nevertheless, we want to draw attention to the fact that essential pieces of the puzzle are still missing and without which a well-rounded and functioning EEA cannot be achieved, such as the **inclusivity framework** and a **framework for adequate student participation**. These topics are sine-qua-non conditions for an EEA that delivers for students.

We highlight that the documents within the spring package, as goes with the whole EEA, should have as a **starting point the policies, practices and commitments within the Bologna Process** and should aim to support and enhance the implementation of the Bologna Process, without creating diverging or parallel practices. This is especially important regarding commitments linked to quality assurance, recognition and joint programmes, even more so that for quality assurance an entire architecture and coherent, well functioning system has been built within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Furthermore, a balance must be struck in terms of the scope of intervention of the spring package documents. On one side, it is expected that additional emphasis is put on elements related to transnational cooperation, where EU added value is most obvious, and to instruments or initiatives stemming from EEA itself (such as European University Alliances or a common approach to microcredentials). On the other side, the **EEA and the values it underpins must impact and leverage all students and higher education institutions**, irrespective of the place or conditions of study, and as such policy initiatives linked to quality assurance and recognition, academic careers or rules related to joint programmes must be **broadly applicable in all circumstances**, considering the additional need for intervention in relation to what already exists.

Finally, while there may be convergence in objectives among various policy-makers and stakeholders, the ambitions of the proposed initiatives should

be complemented by additional effort in getting on board the grassroots academic communities, aiming to reach a common, more concrete long-term vision of EEA and its initiatives.

These general principles, stemming from previous statements and resolutions adopted by the Board of ESU on the EEA or its components, will guide ESU's contribution below to each of the three components of the package.

## II. **Council Recommendation on sustainable and attractive academic careers**

In recent decades, career pathways within higher education across many EU countries have witnessed a concerning decline marked by **increasing precarity and diminishing staff rights**. This trend aligns with the **underfunding** of the sector and the application of new public management principles. Concurrently, the lack of structural support and opportunities for personal development exacerbates the unattractiveness of pursuing academic careers. A council recommendation should thus address all of these issues in an holistic approach to increase the attractiveness of academic career pathways.

### 1. **Working conditions**

One of the most significant challenges undermining the appeal of academic careers is the prevalence of precarious working conditions. Widespread adoption of excessive fixed-term and consecutive short-term employment contracts has rendered academic career pathways unpredictable. While recognizing the importance of some degree of flexibility and overturn in higher education through non-fixed-term contracts, it is essential to address the current imbalance as the extent of precarious working conditions cannot any longer be justified based on the argumentation for permeability vis-a-vis the responsibility for and rights of academic staff. Consequently, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those contemplating starting families often opt out of pursuing a PhD, post-doctorate, and an eventual academic career. Those who choose this path find themselves precariously in financial and career-related dependence on their superiors, leading to the emergence of power hierarchies and exploitation. Additionally, the precarity of the majority of academic staff becomes visible in

those countries where professors have a special protected status, resulting both in dependency on these professors but also showing how the same work encompassing teaching, research, administrative work is connected to unequal compensation.

A parallel situation unfolds for student jobs in many countries, characterised by fixed-term and consecutive short-term employment contracts. Even in countries with collective bargaining agreements for higher education staff, students employed by higher education institutions are often exempted, enabling exploitation concerning wages, working hours, and tasks. As students employed by higher education institutions frequently rely on these jobs for financial support, power imbalances and exploitative relationships with employers, who are often professors and academic staff grading them, can become prevalent.

With regard to PhD students, several models exist in Europe where they are considered both or either students and staff employed by higher education institutions. Unclear hybrid regulatory regimes can create precarity of status and condition.

It needs to be noted that obtaining a doctorate that is connected to a position within a higher education institution is not always possible, leaving some persons not able to pursue a doctoral degree. However, even those who find themselves lucky to have a position at a HEI, a company that collaborates with a HEI and/or were able to obtain a scholarship are often not adequately compensated for their teaching and research duties, asked to do tasks for their coordinator/supervisor outside of their expected role and leaving them in mental distress.

Apart from that, in some countries, there is a differentiation in staff rights regarding full time and part time staff. Depending on the system's design, both academic staff and students employed by higher education institutions may lack access to social security, enjoy less protection than their counterparts in other sectors, or have contracts that fail to secure participation in retirement/pension systems.

All these facets of the problem of the attractability and sustainability of the academic staff in relation to working conditions impacts the capacity of

academic staff to dedicate themselves to teaching duties, and thus stifles the enhancement of the quality of education.

## **2. Discrimination before and during employment**

Despite employment procedures being usually covered by general regulations, nepotism and favouritism are common in the higher education sphere across all higher education systems, as it is for example not uncommon that job postings are designed in ways to fit specific candidates. This is not only discriminatory in itself, but also impacts the diversity of the staff. Across many countries, the representation of women, non-binary individuals, and other marginalised groups decreases at higher academic positions, posing challenges for equity and diversity. Similarly, individuals with disabilities, migration history or belong to ethnic minority groups face underrepresentation throughout academic career progression.

As the [2022 survey by the UniFAFE project](#) with over 42.000 responses from staff and students showed, two out of three respondents have experienced gender-based violence (GBV) since they started working or studying at their institutions, with persons who identify as LGBTQIA+, reported a disability or chronic illness or belonging to an ethnic minority group having been more likely to experience incidents of GBV. Psychological violence was the most reported form of GBV, followed by sexual harassment, while only 13% of the victims reported incidents. Overall, the report shows that there is an evident systematic issue with GBV that also has an impact on the attractiveness of academic careers.

Lastly, persons that have care-giving responsibilities for others (e.g. childcare or care of other relatives) as well as persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses, including those that have disadvantages resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, struggle to combine their academic career with their private life, both in material and non-material ways as entitlements to mitigating concessions are rare (e.g. maternity leave, parental leave, leave of absence to take care of relatives or leave of absence to take care of own health related issues) while there is always the threat that working contracts are not extended.

ESU supports the indicators related to the social dimension of staff in higher education, according to the proposals put forward by the Working Group on Social Dimension in the Bologna Process, which can be found [here](#).

### **3. Parity of teaching with research**

In many academic systems, the evaluation of academic staff primarily revolves around their research achievements, where the quantity of publications and, especially in Western-Europe also the ability to secure third-party funds hold significant sway in recruitment and ongoing performance assessments.

Unfortunately, this focus tends to overshadow the crucial role of pedagogical skills necessary for effective teaching, the first mission of higher education. The challenge is perpetuated systemically, as this results in a lack of incentives for higher education institutions to value and thus support pedagogical development of their staff, leading to a systemic deprioritisation of teaching skills.

In this sense, we welcome the work done within the Bologna Process by the Working Group on Learning and Teaching and endorse the proposals put forward by the Working Group for staff development in the European Higher Education Area, which can be found [here](#).

Compounding the issue, many countries employ models of work distribution that inadequately reflect the genuine demands of teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, elevated by the outside pressure from peers and superiors to use opportunities for self-development to acquire skills regarding research rather than pedagogic aspects of the employment. This misalignment further encourages academic staff to prioritise their research pursuits and creates a fear of pursuing opportunities to develop pedagogical skills, at the expense of developing their teaching skills and designing effective teaching methods.

Overall, given both reputation and/or financial pressures to focus on research rather than teaching skills, the quality of teaching at European higher education institutions declines, and individuals aspiring to prioritise teaching over research find themselves discouraged from pursuing academic career paths.

ESU believes that the value of teaching, pedagogical skills and the evaluation of the quality of teaching in the selection, appraisal and academic progression of staff in higher education should regain its status and be put on equal footing with research. Students should be a key stakeholder in assessing the teaching quality and their view should adequately count in these assessments, alongside other measurements. Funding should be available to staff to enhance teaching quality and innovation.

#### **4. Flexible entry routes**

Although there has been an increased emphasis on providing students access to higher education through flexible learning pathways, supported by measures like open entry policies and recognition of prior- and non-formal learning in recent decades, academia predominantly continues to recruit academic staff from within its own system. While there is a need to ensure that academic staff understand and are able to apply scientific methods, most higher education systems fail to harness the potential of recruiting academic staff that has gained these skills through other pathways than undergoing the standard pathway of obtaining a doctoral degree. Additionally, the stiffness of the current system fails to adapt to an ever-evolving world in which individuals tend to switch between professions multiple times during their lifetime.

#### **5. Support for initial pedagogical and continuous professional development**

As aforementioned, the prevailing emphasis on research skills of academic staff often results in the neglect of pedagogical abilities during recruitment processes. This deficiency persists throughout the career progression of most academic staff, as, in many countries, pedagogical self-development courses remain optional, with higher education institutions and policymakers relying on the notion of institutional autonomy. Furthermore, there is a lot of variation in the offer of pedagogic self-development opportunities across countries. Altogether, these factors constitute an imbalance in the responsibilities of policy-makers, higher education institutions and academic staff towards ensuring that academic staff are prepared for delivering qualitative teaching, which constitutes a public interest. Not offering adequate professional development opportunities in this

regard goes against the rights of academic staff as stipulated in the [1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#).

This issue has been aggravated by the opening of higher education institutions to a more diverse student body in the last decades, aligning with EU targets for increased tertiary education attainment across member countries. While the opening of higher education as such is necessary, financial support for HEIs and academic staff to undergo specialised training on equity, inclusion, and diversity is lacking, as indicated by the findings in the Bologna Process Implementation Report. This exacerbates the problem of lacking pedagogical skills, hindering the adaptation of educational institutions to the evolving landscape of student diversity and societal expectations.

Furthermore, it should be underscored that within higher education funding models that extend beyond student enrollment metrics (such as incorporating research output figures), a deficiency in investment towards comprehensive systems and incentives for the professional development of teaching staff may ensue.

ESU believes that initial and continuous professional development of staff in teaching is both a right and an obligation of academic staff. Compared to other professions, in many countries there is no obligation of staff to continue professional development, which runs counter to the changing landscape of teaching practices and impedes the chain of innovation in learning and teaching approaches. Professional development should be supported by national authorities and higher education institutions through accessible opportunities for staff, as well as giving adequate time to pursue professional development. Teaching centres or other units within HEIs, as well as specialised institutions can be created to support and organise professional development for staff.

## **6. Mobility**

As shown by the Bologna Process Implementation Report, most countries lack clear commitments via corresponding policies regarding the facilitation of participation of disadvantaged staff in learning mobility. Targeted support for staff from disadvantaged groups is not common, with only a handful of European

countries having implemented measures to support disadvantaged staff, e.g. staff with special needs or care-taking responsibilities, to be able to access international mobility. In addition, not all types of mobility and especially with regards to staff are monitored, resulting in a lack of data on staff mobility.

While there is typically encouragement for mobility among doctoral candidates, with higher education institutions actively supporting PhD students in pursuing opportunities in this regard, economic constraints pose a significant hurdle. Many find themselves unable to seize mobility opportunities due to a lack of financial support to cover expenses like travel costs and, potentially, double rent during the mobility period. This financial strain renders such mobility opportunities inaccessible for many doctoral candidates and especially those from vulnerable groups.

### **7. Engaging in academic career pathways with the intention of transitioning out of the higher education sector later on**

Engaging in doctoral studies with the intention of transitioning out of higher education later presents a notable dichotomy. While certain fields necessitate advanced degrees for specialisation, fostering intense competition and implicit pressure to pursue this academic pathway, other domains, particularly in the humanities, are confronted with the opposite. Individuals with doctoral degrees in these disciplines often encounter challenges upon venturing into the broader job market outside of higher education and research institutions, facing unemployment due to overqualification. This predicament renders the prospect of an initial or partial academic career path unappealing.

### **8. Mitigation of causes of brain drain**

In recent years, numerous EU countries, along with the EU itself, have instituted initiatives to address perceived skill shortages by encouraging the migration of skilled workers from other countries (e.g., EU talent pool, initiatives facilitating eased citizenship access, etc.). While these incentives are not inherently negative, their impact is particularly pronounced on eastern and southern European countries (incl. war-torn Ukraine), leading to a notable brain drain. This phenomenon also affects the higher education sectors of these countries, as

individuals opt for academic careers in regions where academics enjoy better salaries and/or other advantages. While the freedom of choice for individuals to pursue their careers in the location of their preference is a fundamental right, failure to mitigate brain drain could have enduring adverse effects on the higher education and general economic sectors of those countries experiencing brain drain. Implementing measures to enhance the attractiveness of academic careers in the countries of origin thus becomes imperative to mitigate the long-lasting repercussions with regard to social cohesion in higher education and the EU at large.

### **Recommendations**

Measures at European level:

- Integrate in the Higher Education observatory data on staff working condition, appraisal and assessment policies, academic career paths
- Create a voluntary competence framework for teaching, promoting comparability, similar to other competences frameworks created by JRC
- Promote advancements in the assessment of teaching quality and pedagogical skills, by collecting best practices and foster space for dialogue and exchange, including through promoting bottom-top change

Improving working conditions:

- Develop a comprehensive strategy for creating more permanent positions in academia.
- Establish fair and gender-equitable recruitment procedures and employment conditions.
- Define clear and predictable career paths for Ph.D./Doctoral positions and academic staff contracts.
- Protect student assistants and doctoral candidates from the impact of dual dependency on supervisors.
- Safeguard rights as workers of student assistants and PhD students/doctoral candidates, where applicable.
- Embed jobs within collective bargaining agreements where applicable.

Addressing discrimination:

- Enforce and strengthen regulations against favouritism and nepotism in recruitment procedures.
- Establish incentives and measures for the employment of underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups.
- Develop comprehensive strategies to address gender-based violence and discrimination in higher education.
- Implement awareness programs and support systems for victims of gender-based violence in the higher education sector.

#### Flexible entry routes

- Introduce and incentivise recruitment of academic staff through flexible entry routes.
- Recognise prior and non-formal learning regarding skills needed to successfully apply for academic staff positions.

#### Pedagogical training of academic staff:

- Elevate the prestige of teaching by introducing incentives for higher education institutions to prioritise pedagogical development of academic staff.
- Elevate the prestige of teaching through financial incentives and reevaluate HEI financing models where HEI funding is not only dependent on the number of students against the effects of other indicators.
- Legislatively anchor pedagogical training as both a right and a duty for academic staff. Where this is not possible, set incentives for HEIs to integrate pedagogical training as a mandatory item within working contracts.

#### Enhance mobility:

- Implement clear policies and targeted measures to support mobility programs for academic staff.
- Focus on addressing economic constraints as an obstacle to staff mobility.
- Prioritise support for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in academic staff mobility programs.

#### Mitigating brain drain:

- Implement measures to enhance the attractiveness of pursuing academic careers in countries suffering from brain drain.
- Provide financial support for academics in those countries.
- Encourage international collaborations to create opportunities for academics to contribute to the development of their home countries while maintaining internationally reputable connections and work experiences.