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EUROPEAN TRADE UNION COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION
COMITE SYNDICAL EUROPEEN DE L'EDUCATION



Supporting Early Career Researchers in Higher Education in Europe

The role of employers and trade unions

Executive Summary

Focus of the research project

In 2013 and 2014, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) of the UK, the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) and the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) worked jointly on the project 'Supporting early career researchers in higher education in Europe: the role of employers and trade unions'. The Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, the Association of Finnish Independent Education Employers (AFIEE) and the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers (FUURT) played an active role in the project.

Through this project, the project partners built further on the evidence collected by the Working Group on Higher Education and Research of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) on the three focus areas: gender equality; the environment for early career researchers (ECRs); and the mobility of academic staff within Europe. The Working Group identified specific challenges that can relate to ECRs including work/life balance issues, the short-term nature of contracts and related job insecurity, social security rights, and career progression. This project was established, with the support of the European Commission, to understand and address these issues in a more comprehensive way and identify the role that education employers and trade unions can play in this.

This project recognised the European Charter for Researchers' acknowledgement that the research career begins at postgraduate level but, given the focus on social dialogue, the principal target group were employed PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers defined as the first two stages in the European Framework of Research Careers. The project primarily focused on researchers in higher education, including those with teaching and research contracts and research-only contracts.

Key findings

In order to get insight in the challenges faced by ECRs and to collect examples of good practice on supporting ECRs, a literature research and in-depth interviews in six very diverse European countries (Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Romania, and the United Kingdom) were conducted. The country visits were arranged in cooperation with EFEE and ETUCE and their members, which identified and facilitated contact with key participants in each country. In most cases interviews were held with representatives from education employers

(employers' associations, university leaders and government ministries), trade unions (national officers), research funders and ECRs.

Based on the case studies and literature review several challenges for ECRs have been identified, including: the use of fixed-term contracts and job security issues; workload and job content; career transition stages and ECR expectations; awareness of alternative employment opportunities; geographical and inter-sectoral mobility; and mentoring and the role of line managers. Furthermore it became clear in our research that the level of social dialogue within higher education in the six countries varies significantly; from Cyprus where a formal platform for social dialogue in higher education does not exist to well-developed negotiation and consultation arrangements in Finland, Germany and the UK.

While the research sought to identify the main challenges it was equally important to explore and identify potential solutions to address and overcome the barriers and obstacles to improving the situation for ECRs. In order to get insight in how ECRs could be supported and to identify the role that education employers and trade unions can play in this, examples of good practice have been collected in the case study countries. These examples were shared and discussed by EFEE and ETUCE members during the ESSDE Working Group 3 meeting on 29 September 2014 and the Final Conference of the project that took place on 21 November 2014 in London. Based on the research and the input of members, the UCEA researchers drafted recommendations for supporting ECRs in higher education in Europe, with a particular focus on employability, gender equality and mobility. The manner in which the recommendations for improvement are applicable in each Member State will however vary, considering the wide variation in higher education systems and the complexity of research and higher education policy and practice across Member States. The recommendations may be relevant at national, regional and institutional level depending on the Member State. European policy and action will also benefit from the consideration of these recommendations:

- Tackle job insecurity for ECRs. It was recognised by both the social partners that it is desirable for more ECRs to have long-term job security so that they can develop their careers. It was also recognised, however, that the short-term nature of most research funding creates a major challenge to achieving this.
- Improve the management of career expectations among ECRs. Both social partners agreed that, without major changes in the pattern of investment in higher education and broader understanding of the value of research skills beyond HE institutions, the mismatch of supply and demand for researchers in Europe would continue to create problems of under-employment of PhD-qualified people.
- Improve the line management of ECRs by principal investigators and supervisors. One area of improvement commonly proposed was in the management skills of those who supervise ECRs.
- Improve the possibility of all forms of mobility for ECRs. Our research indicates that mobility for ECRs is multi-faceted and involves geographical mobility (both within and between member states) and sectoral mobility between HE and other sectors. Geographic mobility is a fundamental aspect of the European Research Area (ERA) and important in the development of research careers, but there are some concerns about the balance of mobility between different Member States. 'Virtual mobility',

aided by improving technology which can facilitate cross-border collaboration and the development of research networks, was also noted as an additional consideration, although it is complementary to mobility rather than a substitute.

- Address barriers to the progression of female ECRs. Our research indicates that female ECRs face particular challenges in developing a research career, especially where they have family responsibilities.
- Improve the attraction of research careers and ensure manageable workloads. While our research found that in all six countries there was no particular problem in recruiting and retaining ECRs to HE, a need for more flexible working practices to enable work-life balance and career breaks was identified.
- Improve the status and recognition of ECRs. A linked issue to improving the attraction of research careers is the need for greater recognition by institutions of the contribution of ECRs to institutional success.
- Improve the representation of ECR interests at national and/or institutional level. One way in which the status and recognition of ECRs could be achieved is through a stronger collective voice for them.
- Consider the involvement of trade unions in the implementation of the European Charter for Researchers and the European Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. Higher education trade unions can play an important role at institutional level in helping to assess the current practice of HEIs against the principles of the Charter and Code and identifying concerns and developing joint solutions.
- Continue European social dialogue on ECRs with a view to monitoring developments in Member States and promoting good practice. The ESSDE Working Group 3 can continue to play an active role in promoting the Charter and Code and supporting the development of other European initiatives in this area.
- Consider establishing platforms for social dialogue about research careers and ECRs where these do not currently exist.
- Trade unions and employers to work in partnership to understand challenges, identify good practice, and improve the evidence base. While good practices in the collection of evidence on the issues regarding ECRs have been identified, there is still work to be done in both the collection and dissemination of robust data on research careers, particularly the career paths of researchers once they leave the higher education sector.

Conclusion

The joint work on 'Supporting early career researchers in Higher Education in Europe' has contributed to the development of mutual trust and support between the employers' organisations and trade unions, respectively members of EFEE and ETUCE, and towards an awareness of the important role that these organisations can play in enhancing the attractiveness of a research career in European Member States.

During our meetings, research interviews, ESSDE Working Groups and Final Conference, it became clear that the dialogue between universities and researchers, between trade unions and employers, between research institutes and their direct community is vital. Fora to share

views and evidence are therefore crucial, particularly where formal platforms for social dialogue are not in existence.

The European Social Partners in education therefore drafted an ESSDE Joint Declaration in which they commit themselves to improve understanding about the specific challenges facing ECRs in Europe incorporating the perspectives and roles of trade unions and employers and the potential options for responding to these challenges, to contribute to the European social dialogue between employers' organisations and trade unions in the education sector, and to inform and involve the European institutions as well as other interested stakeholders on their shared point of view on the topic of early career researchers.



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