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Education International - European Region

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ETUCE position on the future of European Research Area

*Following consultation with HERSC, adopted by ETUCE Bureau
on 16 June 2025.*

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), represents 131 education and research trade unions and over 11 million education personnel in 51 countries. Representing the collective voice of researchers' trade unions, ETUCE strongly advocates for a European research policy that is based on public interest, democratic governance, and fairness in working conditions. ETUCE stresses the importance of a future EU research strategy that empowers researchers and ensures inclusive, sustainable growth for the European research sector.

The below position reacts to the EU policy developments on research announced by the [Union of Skills](#) initiative, and it is based on latest ETUCE resolutions, namely [Research and innovation: supporting fundamental research for resilient societies \(2024\)](#) and [Defending higher education and research in an age of crises \(2024\)](#), and our previous position paper on this issue: [ETUCE Position on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation](#).

1. Europe must prioritize long-term, robust public funding to guarantee research independence and accessibility, especially in fields **serving public and social interests**. Research policy must empower groundbreaking research and researchers, and create a system where they can contribute meaningfully to social challenges developments, supported by adequate resources and fair conditions.
2. The strategic importance of research and innovation should be firmly rooted in Europe's fundamental values, including academic freedom, democracy, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Research should be recognized and governed as a **public good**, not merely as a service to industry or a tool for geopolitical competition. Europe's capacity to lead in research and innovation depends on **robust sustainable public funding** that guarantees long-term planning, independence, and accessibility.
3. We **oppose the commodification** of research and research driven by narrowly defined short-term market-driven outcomes. We are concerned that the [Union of Skills](#) initiative plans to bring together the governance of the European Education Area, the European Skills Agenda and the European Research Area with the involvement of more labour market actors. We regret that the European



University Alliances are continuously encouraged to strengthen partnerships with businesses and their research departments. We insist on a sound balance between ground-breaking curiosity-driven research and research aimed at solving specific and more short-term challenges (defined either by public or private sector). The ERA must resist being driven by narrowly defined, short-term market outcomes that undermine independent and critical research. ETUCE opposes research policies overly aligned with short-term business interests at the expense of academic independence and the broader social value that research delivers in the long term.

4. ETUCE reiterates the urgent need for binding **public investment targets**, calling on Member States to meet the EU's objective of allocating at least 4% of GDP to publicly and privately funded research. It is essential to establish a funding framework that values basic and interdisciplinary research, particularly in critical areas such as Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts (SSHA), which are increasingly vulnerable to market pressures. Research excellence cannot be achieved without long-term, stable, and public investment.
5. While research infrastructures are important, research is not only about buildings, data and laboratories, but it is fundamentally about people, ideas, culture and the advancement of knowledge. We agree with the Commission's recognition of research and technology infrastructures as "strategic assets" vital to Europe's scientific excellence and global competitiveness. However, these infrastructures cannot be effectively built or operated without ensuring that researchers have the necessary support to thrive. In order to ensure of diverse activities of researchers, universities and research institutes should be recommended to join the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) which is committed to reforming the methods and processes by which research, researchers and research organisations are being evaluated.
6. ETUCE urges the European Commission to ensure that research and research infrastructures actively support both basic and applied research, social innovation, and critical inquiry, fostering a research environment that serves the public interest. It is essential to resist the trend of steering funding toward narrowly defined, market-driven outcomes that can undermine independent, curiosity-driven and critical thinking. Research infrastructures should be promoted as spaces for global scientific cooperation and as vital contributors to democratic resilience. Infrastructure platforms should be accessible and interoperable, with open access policies that avoid privileging institutions based solely on prestige or industrial sponsorship. **Equity and inclusiveness** should be guiding principles in shaping Europe's research infrastructure landscape.
7. As digitalisation and artificial intelligence increasingly shape the research landscape, infrastructures must be sustainable and ethically governed. Technologies deployed in research environments should meet high **ethical standards**, respect copyrights, ensure data protection and privacy, and safeguard researchers' autonomy. Open access policies must guarantee that infrastructures are accessible to all researchers, not limited by prestige or industrial sponsorship. ETUCE acknowledges that research shall be ethically grounded. While medical research has been ethically devoid on some occasions, researchers usually work with the purpose of enhancing common knowledge

and therefore toward a public good. We are against the imposition of so-called ethical guidelines by outside bodies, which hinder academic freedom on false grounds. Researchers observe that “Ethics” is increasingly used to limit their research, even though their research frequently stems (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) from ethical concerns. It would be important to review ethical standards with researchers, including on the application and use of GDPR in research.

8. The **precarity** faced by many researchers, especially early-career and female researchers, threatens the sustainability, inclusiveness, and excellence of the ERA. Despite their essential role in advancing Europe’s knowledge and innovation goals, researchers too often encounter short-term, precarious contracts, inadequate salaries, a lack of clear career pathways, and insufficient protections for health, intellectual property rights, and work-life balance. ETUCE welcomes the focus of the Union of Skills on world-class education and research infrastructure, competitive career prospects, and a supportive regulatory and funding environment to make the **ERA attractive to researchers from all around the globe**. ETUCE insists that the new ERA should ensure the Member States in the EU and EU-candidate countries, and in EFTA and EEA countries guarantee **fair working conditions and permanent contracts** as the norm rather than the exception. It should ensure career development opportunities and social protection rights for all researchers, regardless of the nature or duration of their contracts. Furthermore, **gender equality, diversity, and inclusion** should be actively promoted in research careers and leadership roles. The [European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) should be fully implemented and enforced, alongside national collective agreements and employment law. ETUCE is open to discuss with the European Commission how to tackle precarity in early research careers in general and, through a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action ‘MSCA Choose Europe’.
9. A **fair representation of all researchers and their trade unions** should be ensured in the policy-making process to guarantee that policies remain responsive to the needs of ongoing scientific work. Trade unions’ contribution in fact means added value to the policy-making process given their competences on researchers’ professional issues. ETUCE is deeply concerned that researchers’ trade unions continue to be systematically excluded from key governance and policy development structures under the ERA, including those related to infrastructure funding, innovation policy, and career frameworks. We regret that researchers’ trade unions were not invited to contribute to the development of the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp), thus we ask the European Commission to involve them together with trade unions of academics to the **implementation of the framework of research careers** and to the **development of the European competence framework for academic staff in higher education** announced in the Union of Skills initiative.
10. ETUCE asserts unequivocally that **researchers’ unions** should be recognised as **social partners and priority stakeholders** in all European and national decision-making bodies concerning research and innovation. The European Commission should utilize the European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education as formal mechanisms for social dialogue within the sector. Furthermore, all strategies and implementation tools under the ERA, such as the new [Pact for Research and Innovation](#), the [ERA Policy Agenda](#), and

[Commission's proposal](#) for the next European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027 should include the voices of researchers, expressed through their unions. The European Commission must encourage Member States and affiliates to involve trade unions in decision making and implementation at national level. It is essential that trade union rights, collective bargaining agreements, and institutional autonomy are upheld, in accordance with the [UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#) (1997), [UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers](#) (2017), and the [Council of Europe Recommendation 1762 on Academic freedom and university autonomy](#) (2006).

11. ETUCE welcomes the European Commission's ambition to develop a European network of research and technology infrastructures. However, this initiative should not result in further centralisation of resources or deepen existing disparities between EU regions. To ensure equity across the ERA, **research infrastructure funding** should be distributed equitably across geographic regions. One of the aims of this strategy is that the whole ERA benefits from a rich landscape structure and that a stronger and/or centralized steering and coordination mechanism could actually improve existing disparities as a reason of more sustainable funding and joint investments and use of infrastructure, which is the prerequisite of equal access and that infrastructure serves research interests not big tech. Particular attention should be given to supporting capacity building in less advantaged areas to enable their meaningful participation in ERA projects. Governance models for infrastructure should be transparent and inclusive, with a clear role for researchers and their trade union representatives in decision-making processes.
12. The future of successful ERA should depend not just on technological or structural investments, but also on **social and human dimensions, focusing on trust, dignity, fairness, and meaningful collaboration**. Europe's competitive advantage and global leadership in research fundamentally rely on the well-being, empowerment, and engagement of its research workforce. **Social dialogue with researchers' trade unions** should be utilised and respected at both EU and national levels to ensure that research policies reflect the scientific questions of researchers. Infrastructure strategies should be designed to actively reduce regional disparities and promote equitable access across Europe. Above all, academic freedom, the public interest, and ethical governance should be upheld as foundational principles of all research policy. ETUCE stands ready to work constructively with European institutions, Member States, and all stakeholders to help realise a more just, democratic, and sustainable European Research Area.