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# **European Sectoral Social Partners in education promoting quality of academic teaching and management**

## **Executive Summary**

**Sponsor: European Federation of Education Employers**

**In collaboration with: European Trade Union Committee for Education**

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## Executive Summary

This report is part of the project '*European Sectoral Social Partners in education: promoting quality of academic teaching and management*' that is sponsored by the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) and conducted in conjunction with the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE).

The immediate context of the report is provided by the Rome Ministerial Communiqué 2020 (EHEA Rome 2020a), which represents the latest stage in the project set in motion by the Bologna Process 1999. One of the key priority areas identified in the Rome Communiqué is a commitment to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across the higher education sector.

The Communiqué acknowledges the importance of mobilising a collective effort to create the conditions in which change is possible and through which the Communiqué's aims can be secured.

This report focuses on the specific contribution that social dialogue can make to mobilising this collective effort. Social dialogue is uniquely placed to engage social partners (higher education employers and education trade unions) in a process capable of navigating an increasingly challenging higher education environment.

This report provides an overview of a number of contextual issues (the notion of 'quality' in higher education teaching, the European higher education policy agenda and social dialogue arrangements) before presenting research findings from the project and recommendations. The data draws on a survey distributed to all EFEE and ETUCE member organisations.

### Conceptualising 'quality teaching' in higher education

The focus of this project is the enhancement of 'quality' teaching in higher education, and a concern with how the conditions can be created to most effectively support quality. Issues of 'quality' in a teaching context are notoriously difficult to formulate as conceptions of quality cannot be disconnected from wider questions of purpose – literally, what is education for? More specifically, what is higher education for?

Questions of 'quality' in any detailed sense therefore are best resolved at a local level, where contextually bound debates about purpose can be fully addressed. However, in a report focused on higher education it is possible to locate the debate about quality education in a wider debate about the purposes of higher education in more general terms, and specifically what is *distinctive* about teaching in a higher education institution. Approached from this perspective any discussion about quality in higher education teaching starts from an understanding that pedagogy in higher education is fundamentally 'research-informed'.

Institutions of higher education have roles as both producers of new knowledge (through conducting research) and as disseminators of knowledge (through teaching), but what is *distinctive* about higher education pedagogy is the way in which these two activities are combined in an iterative relationship. It is the case that teaching and research are two discrete activities that can co-exist separately, but when considering quality teaching in higher education, pedagogy and research are integrated as each informs the other.

Conceptualised in this way, research-informed teaching assumes three forms:

- Research-led teaching: when teaching is underpinned by pedagogical research.
- Research-based teaching: when the teacher's work communicates their own research.
- Teaching-led research: when knowledge production emerges from the teaching process.

## **Identifying the European higher education policy context**

Higher education institutions are located in systems that face considerable trials and these combine to make the wider higher education environment both complex and challenging. The demand for higher education continues to outstrip supply, and this brings with it rising expectations.

In a European context education provision is considered a high priority because of its ability to integrate both the economic and social goals of the European project. This has been reflected in the European Union's commitment to establish a European Education Area between 2021 and 2030, and specifically a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) focused on increasing the mobility of staff and students and facilitating increased employability across Europe. The EHEA agenda has developed from the Bologna Process first established in 1999 and now progressed through a series of Ministerial meetings and resulting Communiqués. The most recent Ministerial meeting was hosted (virtually) in Rome in 2020 and reaffirmed commitments to academic freedom, the social goals of higher education and the need to enhance quality teaching in higher education institutions. The latter focus was articulated in Annex III of the Rome Communiqué which identified three priorities:

- i. Developing student centred learning
- ii. Continuously enhancing teaching
- iii. Strengthening systemic and institutional capacity to further enhance learning and teaching

In this report the teaching and learning issues identified in the Rome Communiqué are identified as the 'Annex III agenda'. They reflect a bold and ambitious prospectus for reform. However, it is important to recognise that plans for change are layered on a series of crises that have confronted higher education systems in Europe and beyond for more than a decade. These include:

- The economic crisis: the legacy of 2008/9 continues to present many higher education systems with significant funding problems
- The socio-political crisis: increased social fracturing in which, amongst many issues, populist movements increasingly confront notions of 'truth' and science.
- The public health crisis: an unprecedented pandemic that had dramatic immediate impacts on higher education institutions and which will have myriad long term consequences for the sector.

All of these developments shape the terrain on which higher education systems function. They also make change more difficult. The Rome Communiqué recognised the need to mobilise a collective effort to bring about the changes it seeks, involving stakeholders across the system, but in particular the need to engage social partners through social dialogue.

## **Social dialogue in European higher education**

Within higher education systems and institutions matters of governance and decision-making are notoriously complex. In most countries public universities are dominant (although the size of the private sector can vary significantly) however, universities are often not 'typical' public sector

institutions because of historical commitments to institutional autonomy from the State. In reality higher education institutions can be considered a complex mix of managerial authority, collegial governance, professional autonomy and social dialogue.

It is often argued that collegial governance is a distinctive feature of higher education institutions, but it is important to recognise that the balance between these elements of decision-making is not stable and constantly in flux. For example, in recent years it is widely recognised that collegial governance has diminished as managerial authority has been enhanced.

Social dialogue within higher education institutions is an equally complex part of the picture, with considerable variation between systems (and sometimes between institutions within systems). These differences have the potential to increase if the social dialogue agenda is broadened to include the teaching and learning issues identified in Annex III of the Rome Communiqué. In order to capture the complexity this report developed a framework for analysing social dialogue in higher education across four elements:

- Social dialogue **agenda**: identifies the issues that are the subject of discussions within social dialogue arrangements.
- Social dialogue **levels**: identifies the levels at which relevant decisions are being made; for example national or institutional, but also sometimes different levels within institutions.
- Social dialogue **forms**: recognises that social dialogue assumes many forms: including negotiation (collective bargaining), consultation, information sharing and joint working on projects and initiatives.
- Social dialogue **frequency**: acknowledges that it is necessary to get some sense of the regularity, or otherwise, with which issues are addressed through social dialogue.

## Key findings

The data from the survey attests to the complexity of the higher education industrial relations environment. For example, most social partners represent education sectors beyond higher education and most represent both public and private sectors. A majority of survey respondents indicated they were one of two or more organisations representing employers or employees and although most social partners report participation in tri-partite social dialogue involving government, employers and trade unions in a significant number of cases employers have no control over pay, which is determined by government.

Satisfaction levels with social dialogue are clearly uneven. From a relatively small sample it was evident that there is often broad satisfaction with social dialogue arrangements and that these can work well. However, in a number of instances there is considerable frustration with social dialogue arrangements. This frustration increases significantly in relation to negotiation (collective bargaining) where the stakes are often highest and where power relations between parties are intended to be more equal (negotiation aims for an agreement, whereas other forms of social dialogue have no similar ambition).

Analysis of social dialogue experiences focused on issues identified in the 'Annex III agenda' and were grouped according to five headings:

Terms and conditions of employment  
Curriculum and pedagogy

Professional development and professional standards  
Higher education policy and funding  
Academic freedom and intellectual property

Survey responses indicated that ‘terms and conditions’ issues were most likely to be discussed through social dialogue, as would be expected. However, results were not always as might be expected. Pay is commonly discussed, and most likely to be discussed at the national level. However, institutional level bargaining is also significant for pay issues while a number of social partners indicated they had no involvement in social dialogue relating to pay. Another priority issue in this area related to the use of precarious contracts, which were typically discussed at the national level and discussed frequently. Issues relating to equalities were discussed less frequently, more typically at the institutional level and more likely through consultation than negotiation.

Issues in the Annex III agenda that relate very directly to the curriculum and pedagogy were much less likely to be the focus of social dialogue. However, where these issues were discussed the social dialogue was much more likely to take place at institutional level as this is the level where these decisions are being made. Where pedagogical issues have significant implications for workload, or contractual consequences, then these were more likely to become issues for social dialogue. These patterns were also reflected in relation to issues of professional development and professional standards. These issues were the focus of national level negotiations, but were more frequently the focus of institution level social dialogue. Although engagement with ‘professional standards’ issues was more uneven (as this is not a concept recognised in a formal sense in many locations), social dialogue relating to professional development was more common, and this was likely to take place nationally and locally.

Within the project it was widely recognised that supporting quality teaching required pedagogical activity to be given proper recognition for career purposes, and that the equilibrium between teaching and research needed to reflect the time commitment and value of both. This in turn was likely to have professional development implications. On these issues the so-called ‘industrial’ and ‘professional’ aspects of academic labour potentially coincide and these may be fruitful areas to focus social dialogue agendas when addressing teaching and learning issues.

With regard to higher education policy reform social partners are consulted in a clear majority of instances. At an institutional level the most common form of social dialogue was also consultation. A small number of respondents indicated they have no involvement in social dialogue relating to policy reform.

A similar picture emerges in relation to social dialogue about higher education funding. Most respondents indicated that at the national level social dialogue about funding took the form of information sharing. Where social dialogue takes place in relation to funding then this is more likely to occur at the national level than at institution level. Several respondents indicated that social dialogue about funding is frequent, but more respondents indicated that they are not involved in social dialogue about higher education funding at all. Throughout the project concerns were raised about funding issues, often from employers’ organisations and trade unions. This is clearly an area of frustration and these tensions are likely to intensify if current inflationary pressures erode the real value of funding levels and this has the potential to impact the social dialogue environment.

Academic freedom, and professional autonomy, can be seen as key features of the distinctive nature of higher education teaching, given the importance of freedom of thought within democratic societies. These issues are identified as a matter of negotiation among a relatively small minority of survey respondents, although social partners are involved on a consultative basis more commonly. These issues are not discussed frequently, but as might be expected, on a more occasional, ‘as required’,

basis. Similar issues applied to the discussion of Open Educational Resources with these issues emerging as a higher priority following the shift to remote working during the pandemic.

## Recommendations

1. Extend the bargaining agenda and identify the issues around which progress can be made.

Developing social dialogue to enhance quality teaching and learning requires social partners on both sides to be willing to extend the bargaining agenda and promote social dialogue on a range of issues that have not always been seen as traditional (or legitimate) social dialogue concerns. The 'Annex III agenda' requires social partners to extend the bargaining agenda into new territory.

2. Develop robust social dialogue structures necessary for engaging with the extended bargaining agenda. This requires ensuring social dialogue takes place at all the levels where decisions on the extended bargaining agenda are being made.

The research suggests that social dialogue is often weak and limited in form. Extending the bargaining agenda requires social dialogue structures capable of managing a wider range of social dialogue issues. Crucially, this requires the development of social dialogue at all organisational levels where decisions relating to teaching and learning are being made. The research in this report highlights that key decisions relating to teaching and learning are made at institutional level and social dialogue arrangements must reflect that. However, within institutions important decisions relating to teaching and learning are made at many levels and social dialogue needs to be built in to all appropriate levels.

3. Identify a strategy for extending the bargaining agenda based on a robust analysis of the current state of social dialogue, focusing on issues and activities that can offer progress.

Extending the bargaining agenda in the ways suggested by this project can only be developed by taking full account of context, and a transparent assessment of the current state of social dialogue in each setting. Extending the bargaining agenda is challenging in any situation, but most unlikely if current social dialogue arrangements are fragile and poorly developed. Progress must be based on an open assessment of the current position, and where there are difficulties, strategies need to be developed accordingly. In such cases work must focus on issues where progress is possible, relying on forms of social dialogue that can help build trust. For this purpose, the diagnostic tool presented in this report (see Appendix 3) may be helpful.

4. Develop organisational capacity

Effective social dialogue requires commitments from all sides, as well as resources and structures, and all these elements need to be in place for social dialogue to function effectively and make a positive contribution to outcomes. This requires investment from all parties, at all levels, but is especially needed at the institutional level where these issues are discussed.

5. Build networks of support and identify alliances

Change on a significant scale requires a collective effort and this requires alliances. These alliances can be most powerful when they involve social partners finding common ground and identifying ways to work together. On many issues, such alliances may not be possible. Social dialogue is, after all, a mechanism for seeking to resolve what are tensions based on competing interests. However, on many issues it may be possible to work with others (within and outside social dialogue relationships) and such alliances can help create momentum for change.