WORKSHOP BACKGROUND DOCUMENT
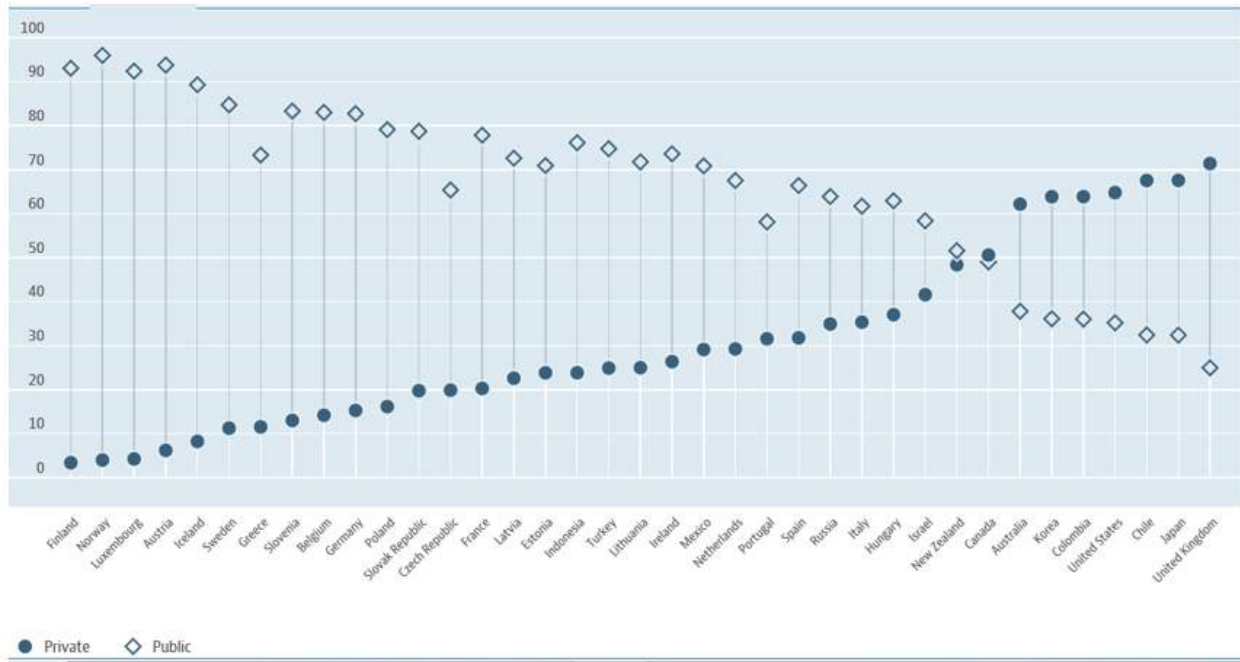
Higher Education and Research

During the last few years, the reduction of core public funding for teaching and research has been a major trend in many European countries. OECD data (2016) shows that public investment in higher education is shrinking in the OECD countries and that public funding for higher education institutions is not a top priority for most governments. The risk is big that the funding will further decrease with the COVID-19 crisis and the economic consequences of the pandemic.

At the same time the core principle of higher education and research, **academic freedom**, is suffering for numerous reasons, including funding cuts to higher education institutions and lack of freedom of expression in certain countries. In Turkey, academics have faced prosecution, harassment and bans on public employment and overseas travel for signing a peace petition or for being associated with organisations who are critical of the current government.[1] In Central and Eastern Europe, there have been many threats to institutional autonomy and academic freedom, including government actions to restrict individual higher education institutions, such as the Central European University in Hungary. Within the Bologna Process the representatives of 48 education ministries in the Bologna Follow-Up Group are discussing on how to monitor the respect of academic freedom within countries.

Threats to academic freedom also come from **quasi-market policies**, governance and organisational models taken from the private sector like so-called 'excellence initiatives' and an expansion of short-term project funding, which put pressure on higher education institutions and staff to bring in alternative sources from businesses or individual donors. For example, a report from the University and College Union of the UK shows that 19.1% of EU academics admitted to have subjected themselves to self-censorship at work for fear of negative repercussions, such as loss of benefits and career prospects, with the comparable figure for UK-based academics amounting to 35.5%.[2]

1   Scholars at Risk (2019): Free to Think 2019, Scholars at Risk: New York, pp. 25-30
2   Karran,T and Mallinson, K. (2017): Academic freedom in the UK: legal and normative protection in a comparative context. UCU: London, p. 1.

The aforementioned societal and economic changes have also led to the erosion of democratic governance of higher education institutions and put major pressures on higher education and research staff. In many European countries, important cuts in public funding for higher education institutions resulted in **declining employment conditions** for academics and education support personnel. For example, in Finland, funding cuts resulted in a decrease of the number of personnel employed in higher education institutions ; in Latvia, dramatic budget cuts (nearly 50% less in 2009/10) had an important impact on salaries and working conditions; and the United Kingdom, there has been a growth of short-term contracts and so called 'zero hours' contracts.[3] In Greece, most staff on short-term or temporary contracts lost their employment due to severe budget cuts.[4]

There are high disparities regarding the contractual arrangements of academic staff across Europe. In countries like France, Malta and Turkey, 80% or more academics have an indefinite contract, while this is the case for only 30% or less of the academics in Germany, Austria, Estonia, Finland and Serbia.[5]

Academics across Europe face **decreasing job security**, due to budget constraints, reduced employment opportunities, and an increasing proportion of staff in externally funded positions. Short term contracts and project-based contracts concern especially junior positions, while more women researchers work part-time and under precarious employment conditions.[6] **Precarity affects high education and research staff across Europe**. Several countries recently adopted reforms which extend the possibilities for performance-related pay of academics, making this kind of remuneration possible in virtually all European higher education systems.[7]

According to a 2015 Education International Survey, half of the academics surveyed across nine countries reported that their working conditions had deteriorated. They must face pressures to teach more students and to work longer hours.[8]

---

3   European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017): Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff - 2017. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4   Ibid.
5   Ibid.
6   European Commission (2019): She Figures 2018. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
7   European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017): Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff - 2017. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
8   Marie Clarke (2015): Creating a Supportive Working Environment in European Higher Education. Retrieved at https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/7558/1/Creating_a_Supportive_Working_Environment_in_European_Higher_Education_pdf.pdf

Share of researchers with a fixed term contract							
Of all researchers							
	EU total	**Per career stage**		**Per FOS**		**Per gender**	
2012 (n=8,986)	34.3%	R1:	70.6%	MED:	36.3%	F:	38.5%
		R2:	55.6%	NAT:	38.4%	M:	31.8%
		R3.	23.8%	SOC:	28.5%		
		R4:	7.7%				
2016 (n=9,213)	26.1%	R1:	65.0%	MED:	22.9%	F:	31.3%
		R2:	50.0%	NAT:	27.8%	M:	22.9%
		R3.	15.9%	SOC:	26.6%		
		R4:	6.1%				

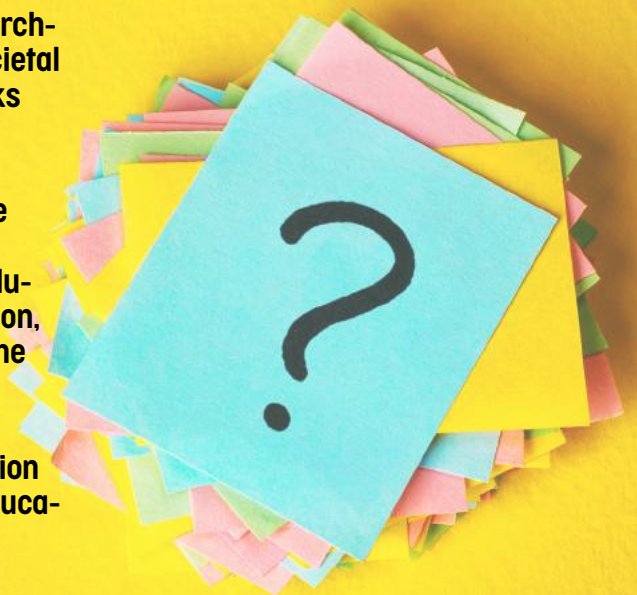Source: MORE3 EU HE Survey (2016) and MORE2 EU HE survey (2012)
Note:
- Based on question 32: "Type of contract"

The COVID-19 crisis adds additional pressures on academic staff, such as the lack of preparation and support in delivering 'emergency remote teaching'. Proficiency in information and communication technology are crucial in responding to this unprecedented situation and yet academics have a rather unequal access to continuous professional development. For example, because of the high degree of institutional autonomy in the area of continuous professional development, there are no large-scale training programmes for academics in most European countries.[9]

The COVID-19 crisis has also heightened the vulnerabilities of precariously-employed staff in higher education, both in relation to their pay and job security, while the massive disruption to student mobility, particularly for international students, will have a major effect on a number of higher education systems in Europe. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on final examination from secondary schools and admission to higher education. Indeed, following Eurydice's report on national student fees and support, several countries attribute grants to students on the basis of their secondary school examination performance and such systems need to be adapted in the wake of the school closures.

Therefore, the Workshop aims at exchanging experiences on new challenges staff in higher education and research face and possible solutions around the following questions:

· **How to support higher education teachers and researchers to meet the needs of the constantly changing societal and economic environment, casualisation and attacks against academic freedom?**

· **What kind of measures/policies are needed to ensure that high quality and inclusive higher education is a right for all especially in light of the cuts in higher education and research budgets, demands of digitalisation, impact of the COVID-19 and other demands towards the sector?**

· **What are and what should be the response of education trade unions to the increasing pressure on higher education teachers and researchers?**

---

9   European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017): Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff - 2017. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.