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2024/0078 (NLE)

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education

{SWD(2024) 74 final}

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

1.1. Reasons for and objectives of the proposal

In the knowledge economy, Europe's future will be shaped by the performance of its education systems and its ability to compete in the global race for talent. For many of the challenges Europe is facing, education is bound to be part of the solution.

Europe's higher education sector plays a key role in equipping its workforce with the high-level skills needed on the labour market and lays the foundation for Europe's innovation capacity and competitiveness, notably in the context of a shrinking workforce. It is also instrumental for the capacity of EU citizens to learn and think independently, which is crucial for a functioning democracy.

The higher education sector must attract talented staff - and retain it. That staff should be able to thrive, regardless of background, and enjoy academic freedom, in line with democratic principles. Academic staff today take on a wide range of tasks, beyond traditional teaching and research roles. Career prospects and job satisfaction are decisive to retain academic talent.

This proposal focuses on two further issues that impact the attractiveness of academic careers:

- (1) ***Pioneering new joint transnational educational activities*** - like a European degree¹ - requires dedicated staff with specific skills. However, experience² shows that engaging in transnational cooperation can result in additional workload which is not always recognised or rewarded. This work can be perceived as something to be performed on top of a full-time job, and this can be a disincentive to engaging in work on transnational cooperation.
- (2) ***Equipping people with high-quality skills*** requires well-trained, agile academic staff. However, the criteria for career appraisal and promotion in the higher education sector are more closely linked to research activities and less to the quality of teaching. This can discourage academic staff from teaching, coupled with a neglect of continuous training to keep them updated on pedagogical methods and content. As a result, academic staff may struggle with a balance between teaching and research, and therefore, engage less in teaching.

Higher education institutions also guide innovation and the economic, civic and cultural development of their region. They develop people's knowledge and professional skills - but also bring people and communities together to the benefit of both. Yet, many higher education institutions do not attribute the necessary value to activities such as business and community engagement, place-based innovation³ or participation in institutional governance.

This proposal seeks to address this as part of a larger package, with a Communication on a blueprint for a European degree and a proposal for a Council recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition system. This initiative supports work towards a European

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a blueprint for a European degree COM(2024) 144.

² European Universities alliances, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) Joint Doctoral Programmes, and EIT-labelled programmes funded under the Erasmus+ programme.

³ Place-based innovation aims to achieve urban/regional economic transformation that surpasses impacts of national or EU-level strategies. This emphasises a bottom-up approach involving all relevant stakeholders, empowering cities or regions to develop strategies tailored to their needs. See Rissola, G. and Haberleithner, J., Place-Based Innovation Ecosystems. A case-study comparative analysis, Publications Office of the European Union, 2020, ISBN 978-92-76-19006-6.

degree, but goes further, with the recommendation on attracting and retaining excellent academic and professional staff in higher education to advance this goal.

The ultimate goal of the initiative is a thriving higher education sector, as a key building block of the European Education Area⁴, to help Europe tackle future challenges, by equipping people with skills in line with changing societal needs.

This proposal should be seen alongside the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe⁵ - with both reinforcing synergies between the European Education Area and the European Research Area (ERA)⁶.

1.2. Structural and operational issues to be addressed by this recommendation

Evidence from studies and consultations point to the disincentives for staff in higher education to engage in transnational cooperation and teaching, and the lack of recognition for these activities in career progression.

1.2.1. Promote, recognise, and value engagement in deeper transnational cooperation

Research shows a widespread perception that the time staff in higher education devote to deepening transnational cooperation (including building and deploying European Universities alliances⁷) is not recognised adequately in their careers. In a dedicated survey on this issue⁸, most respondents agreed that transnational cooperation in teaching and learning was part of their higher education institutional strategy (66%), and that career pathways for academic staff effectively enabled, supported, and encouraged transnational cooperation activities (65%). However, when it came to appraisal, promotion, and reward mechanisms, only 40% of respondents agreed that engagement in transnational cooperation was effectively taken into account. In many cases, respondents expressed the view that this work was underestimated and people were expected to do it in addition to their full-time job.

Furthermore, European and international mobility opportunities for staff are not sufficiently facilitated. Academic staff participating in the Erasmus+ programme or Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action admit that these two programmes allow them to make greater use of innovative teaching methods and foster closer connections with the labour market. Yet, a report⁹ on higher education systems resources in 24 responding OECD¹⁰ countries highlights that only half of those sampled have dedicated national programmes to fund and support staff mobility.

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 30 September 2020, COM(2020)625 final.

⁵ Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (OJ C, C/2023/1640, 29.12.2023).

⁶ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en#what-is-era.

⁷ The European Universities initiative is an EU initiative aimed at establishing alliances between higher institutions from across Europe. It is implemented primarily through Erasmus+ funding.

⁸ Research conducted by [ECORYS](#) (a research-based consultancy) in 2023.

⁹ OECD (2024), 'The state of academic careers in OECD countries: An evidence review', *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 91, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en>.

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

1.2.2. Promote, recognise, and value diverse academic roles and tasks, including innovating and effective teaching

Academic staff working in higher education institutions are expected by their employer and the wider society to fulfil various additional roles and tasks¹¹ on top of teaching and research. Ultimately, these additional tasks shape the role that higher education plays in society - educating highly skilled professionals and tackling social and economic challenges. However, these diverse tasks are not valued equally. While formal mechanisms to recognise teaching in academic careers exist in most European countries, they do not seem to work well in practice. It is vital that teaching and other non-research academic activities – all of which are crucial to society – are valued on an equal footing with research¹².

Stakeholder organisations are concerned about this lack of parity of esteem between research and teaching. They are also troubled by the high levels of dissatisfaction reported with institutional practices related to the diversity of academic roles and tasks. For example, over two-thirds (70%) of respondents to a recent survey¹³ stated that the workload of academic staff was not fairly distributed evenly across staff types, seniority levels, and roles. Another recent study shows that while teaching performance is regularly evaluated in many higher education systems, the results of this evaluation have only a limited impact on career progression, with little recognition given to quality and innovative teaching¹⁴.

Linear career path models are another matter of concern to academic staff, as they hinder the capacity of higher education institutions to innovate and engage with their wider ecosystem. Academic staff can rarely move seamlessly between academia and other sectors. Yet, such a broadening of experience would contribute to both the quality of teaching and academic life.

In addition, support for development of academic staff is seen as insufficient. Dealing with a more diverse student body and involving them in a student-centred learning environment requires continuous updating of teaching methods. While there is support to academic staff to improve teaching methods (teaching enhancement)¹⁵, this is not widespread across the European Education Area. The implementation of a formal teaching qualification requirement for academic staff taking up a teaching role in higher education, is even less common¹⁶.

1.2.3. Promote competitive, safe, fair, free and non-discriminatory conditions to attract and retain staff

High quality teaching and transnational cooperation can only be developed in a free, safe, predictable, and stable working environment. The wellbeing of the academic staff relies on several factors: possibility for professional development, equality and non-discrimination in recruitment and promotion, mobility opportunities, and intellectual freedom. These are key factors to attract younger generations to a career in academia. At the same time, the lack of inclusiveness and competitiveness in terms of attractive working conditions may deter people from opting for this type of career. The high proportion of precarious contracts in the field of

¹¹ These include transnational cooperation, business and community engagement (cooperation with different sectors of the economy and local communities), place-based innovation, and participation in institutional governance.

¹² See ECORYS online survey and OECD evidence review. Also, the Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (as adopted in 2023) recommends assessment and reward systems that recognise a diversity of outputs, activities and practices. This includes teaching, academia-industry cooperation, and interaction with society.

¹³ Research conducted by ECORYS in 2023.

¹⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en>.

¹⁵ 5 Member States have regulatory obligations to improve teaching: DK, EE, FR, LT and LV. See Zhang, T. (2022). National Developments in Learning and Teaching in Europe. Brussels: European University Association.

¹⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en>.

higher education, especially in early-stage careers, prevent them from developing their professional skills. That is why effective social dialogue and academic freedom are necessary supportive elements to achieve high quality education and transnational cooperation.

The specific characteristics of higher education and variety of institutions means the situation of academic staff is quite varied - in particular among those in the early stages of their careers. Many staff in higher education are employed on short-term or precarious contracts¹⁷. While this may offer higher education institutions more flexibility, it can make the academic profession less attractive.

Aside from job security and working conditions, the wellbeing of academic and professional services staff also relies on reassurance that they can teach without interference or fear of reprisal. In a recent study, analysing the self-perception of academic freedom by 4,000 academic staff in EU countries, 45% reported an erosion in the protection of academic freedom¹⁸. Any incidents that could possibly undermine academic freedom may hamper academic work, which takes place, by its very nature, in a public space. Fear of persecution for one's scientific views is a major disincentive to engage in a career in higher education.

Europe has a highly accessible higher education system compared with the rest of the world. However, disadvantaged groups are still underrepresented among students, academic staff and researchers. It is important for higher education institutions to create an environment where talents from disadvantaged groups stay in academia and contribute – with their specific experience – to high quality academic work¹⁹. Academic staff from underrepresented groups may act as role models for disadvantaged students, which could potentially help to attract diverse talents. Considering the societal role of academia, it needs to be open to diversity and create non-discriminatory and safe conditions to enable all staff to innovate and teach. Lack of inclusive and accessible recruitment, employment and mobility opportunities for persons with disabilities deter them from taking up or maintaining a career in this field. In 2020, six times fewer persons with disabilities than those without worked in the education sector²⁰. Evidence points to persistent gender imbalances, including contractual inequality²¹. Women are more often employed on precarious (9% vs. 7.7% in 2019) and temporary contracts (3.9 percentage points more) than men. Despite progress in recent years, women are under-represented among academic staff in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and in higher rank positions. Such gender differences can have a direct influence on the gender pay gap, as STEM fields tend to be associated with higher pay levels. The average proportion of women holding full professorships or equivalent positions is 26% in the EU, and an even greater gender imbalance is found in governance, where only 24% of heads of higher education institutions are women.

Improving the working conditions and addressing barriers and gender inequalities in academic careers play an important role in promoting competitive, free, inclusive, safe, fair and non-discriminatory conditions in academia, as they are part of the elements needed to increase the

¹⁷ Evidence indicates that in some systems, about a quarter of staff may be employed on short-term contracts: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en>.

¹⁸ Karran, T. & K. Beiter (2020), 'Academic freedom in the European Union: legalities and realities', in Bergan, S., T. Gallagher and I. Harkavy (eds.), *Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and the Future of Democracy*, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

¹⁹ [Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies - NESET \(nesetweb.eu\)](https://www.nesetweb.eu/).

²⁰ European Disability Expertize, The employment of persons with disabilities, [Reports - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurodisability/en/reports-employment-social-affairs-inclusion-european-commission)

²¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, She figures 2021 – Gender in research and innovation – Statistics and indicators, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090>.

attractiveness of higher education institutions for academic staff and foster high quality teaching and transnational cooperation.

Data on academic careers is often fragmented, making it difficult to analyse certain aspects in depth. Work on filling some of the existing data gaps has already begun as part of the work carried out by the European Higher Education Sector Observatory²² and the research careers observatory, to be developed within the European Research Area to monitor research careers in all sectors²³. However, better data collection and integration is needed to both monitor the institutional transformation in the EU's higher education sector and to inform policymaking.

1.3. Objectives pursued by the proposed Council recommendation

This Council recommendation aims to create a common EU-level framework on attractive, inclusive and sustainable careers in higher education.

1.4. Consistency with existing policy provisions in the policy area

The proposal is a key deliverable under the European Education Area and builds on previous work set out in the below paragraphs.

The Commission Communication on a European strategy for universities²⁴ highlights the need for 'flexible and attractive academic careers in higher education'. The Communication states that the 'Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will propose a European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education' 'in synergy with the research career framework developed under the European Research Area'. It also calls on Member States 'to promote parity of esteem between different academic career paths and provide more flexibility for academic careers, beyond academia.

This objective was further reiterated in the Council Conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe²⁵ which states that 'the full variety of academic activities both within and beyond academia, on all dimensions of higher education institutions' missions, needs to be considered in their career assessments'.

This proposal for a Council recommendation considers the experiences of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, which contribute to these objectives by (i) attracting international talent to Europe; (ii) promoting attractive working conditions; and (iii) supporting training, mobility and career development of researchers and academic staff in Europe.

The Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe²⁶, aims at strengthening research careers in all sectors, including by introducing a new European Charter for Researchers. Both the framework and the Charter are in line with the Council Conclusions on 'Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and

²² See Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022)16 final. The Commission is to set up the European Higher Education Sector Observatory. This Observatory combines the best of the current EU data tools and capacities in one single place, while further enhancing their use.

²³ The Europe Work Programme 2023-2024, 'Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area'.

²⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022) 16 final.

²⁵ Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe (OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9).

²⁶ Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (OJ C, C/2023/1640, 29.12.2023, p. 1).

working conditions and making brain circulation a reality'²⁷ adopted in May 2021, and a key deliverable annexed to the Council Conclusions on the 'Future governance of the European Research Area'²⁸.

The Commission adopted on 13 November 2023 a proposal for a Council recommendation 'Europe on the Move – learning mobility opportunities for everyone'²⁹. That proposed recommendation aims at providing opportunities for educators, staff and learners at any age.

The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)³⁰ sets as a priority, 'making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all'. This priority is strengthened by actions promoting 'a mindset of reskilling and upskilling throughout the Union'³¹ during the European Year of Skills 2023/2024 and skills policies to match learners' needs and skill sets (including those acquired during mobility) with labour market opportunities.

The Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training³² calls on Member States to 'continue to improve measures to recruit and train teachers with expertise in the areas of (...) advanced digital technologies in higher education, while acknowledging their need for a varied range of pedagogical and didactic skills'.

1.5. Consistency with other Union policies

By strengthening higher education, this proposal for a Council recommendation contributes to Europe's efforts to invest in people and their skills, laying the foundation for sustained growth, competitiveness and high employment, in line with the European Semester.

It is also consistent with the European Pillar of Social Rights³³, which sets out essential principles and rights relating to equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion, and the November 2019 Council Recommendation on 'Access to social protection for workers and the self-employed'³⁴.

2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

2.1. Legal basis

The proposal is based on Articles 165(4) and 166(4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 165(1) of the TFEU lays down that the Union is to 'contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between

²⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49980/st09138-en21.pdf>

²⁸ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14308-2021-INIT/en/pdf>. See actions 4 'Promote attractive and sustainable research careers, balanced talent circulation and international, transdisciplinary and inter-sectoral mobility across the ERA'; 3 'Advance towards the reform of the Assessment System for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact'; and 5 'Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, taking note of the Ljubljana declaration'.

²⁹ Proposal for a Council recommendation 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone, 15 November 2023, COM(2023) 719 final.

³⁰ Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (OJ C 66, 26.2.2021).

³¹ Decision (EU) 2023/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on a European Year of Skills (OJ L 125, 11.5.2023, p. 1).

³² Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training (OJ C, C/2024/1030, 23.1.2024).

³³ Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights (OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p. 10).

³⁴ Council Recommendation of 8 November 2019 on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed (OJ C 387, 15.11.2019, p. 1).

Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems'. Article 165(2) of the TFEU further specifies that Union action in education is aimed at 'promoting cooperation between educational establishments' and 'at encouraging mobility of students and teachers.

Article 166(1) of the TFEU stipulates that the Union shall implement a vocational training policy. Article 166(2) of the TFEU states that the Union action must aim to 'stimulate cooperation on training between educational or training establishments and firms'.

Additionally, the proposal is based on Article 153(1) points (b) and (i) in conjunction with Article 292. Whilst Article 153(1) points (b) and (i) state that the Union shall support and complement the activities of the Member States in the field of working conditions and equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work, Article 292 of the TFEU provides the legal basis for the Council to adopt recommendations based on a proposal from the Commission.

The initiative does not propose any extension of EU regulatory power or binding commitments on Member States. It is the Member States who will decide, based on their national circumstances, how they implement this Council recommendation.

2.2. Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)

The proposal is in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity as provided for in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). It seeks to increase transnational cooperation in higher education while safeguarding the ability of the Member States to take independent legislative decisions and implement measures aimed at fostering deeper cooperation between higher education institutions. Notwithstanding Member States' responsibility, transnational cooperation issues are by nature better addressed at EU level, through joint action.

2.3. Proportionality

The proposal is in conformity with the principle of proportionality as provided for in Article 5(4) of the TEU. Neither the content, nor the form of the proposal exceeds what is necessary to achieve its objectives. The actions proposed are proportional to the pursued objectives as they respect Member States' practices and the diversity of systems. Any commitments by Member States are voluntary in nature and each Member State remains free to decide on the implementation of the proposal. The added value of action at EU level is to foster deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions from different Member States, to improve the functioning of higher education in the EU and increase its worldwide attractiveness and competitiveness.

2.4. Choice of instrument

To achieve the objectives referred to above, Articles 165(4) and 166(4) of the TFEU, as well as Article 292 as explained above, provide for the adoption by the Council of recommendations, on a proposal from the Commission. A Council recommendation is an appropriate instrument within the field of education and training where the Union has a supporting responsibility.

3. RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

3.1. Stakeholder consultations

Numerous consultation activities have been carried out over the recent years at the meetings of: (i) the European Education Area Strategic Framework Working Group on Higher Education; (ii) the Directors General for Higher Education, and (iii) the Bologna Follow-up Group and of the Learning and Teaching Working Group.

Regular discussions took place between the Commission and higher education institutions, stakeholder organisations, including the European Universities. Many stakeholders provided input in written contributions (EUA, YERUN, LERU, CESAER, The Guild, EURASHE³⁵).

An online survey further strengthened stakeholders' input, as did findings from an earlier literature review. This survey and these findings clearly indicated the perceived lack of recognition for teaching and other activities compared with research, in academic careers at higher education institutions. The call for evidence³⁶ was published on 9 January 2024 and closed on 6 February 2024, and stakeholders generally welcomed the initiative.

The Commission also had exchanges with social partners such as ETUCE³⁷ throughout the preparation process of this recommendation.

3.2. Collection and use of expertise

The proposal is based on evidence and input received from studies and reports: ECORYS comprehensive literature review and online survey, including consultations meetings and focus groups³⁸; OECD evidence review on academic careers³⁹, and a complementary review on wellbeing of academic staff conducted by NESET⁴⁰.

Inputs based on Erasmus+ funded projects involving stakeholders organisations also provided input: the LOTUS project⁴¹ coordinated by the EUA and the E-note project⁴².

3.3. Impact assessment

An impact assessment was not carried out, given the voluntary nature of the proposed activities and the scope of the impacts expected. The development of the proposal was informed by prior studies, consultations with stakeholders and Member States, and a call for evidence.

3.4. Fundamental rights

The proposal respects the principles recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁴³, namely the right to education under Article 14, the respect for the arts and scientific and academic freedom under Article 13, non-discrimination under Article 21,

³⁵ **EUA**: European University Association; **YERUN**: Young European Research Universities Network; **LERU**: League of European Research Universities; **CESAER**: Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research; **The Guild**: The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities; **EURASHE**: European Association of Institutions in Higher Education.

³⁶ [Attractive and sustainable careers in higher education \(europa.eu\).](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-room/default.aspx?id=14122)

³⁷ European Trade Union Committee for Education.

³⁸ Research conducted by ECORYS in 2023.

³⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1787/ea9d3108-en>.

⁴⁰ <https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/student-and-staff-mental-wellbeing-in-european-higher-education-institutions/>.

⁴¹ 'Leadership and Organisation for Teaching and Learning at European Universities': [LOTUS \(eua.eu\)](https://www.lotus-eua.eu/).

⁴² [Home - European Network on Teaching Excellence](https://www.european-network-on-teaching-excellence.eu/).

⁴³ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 391).

equality between women and men under Article 23, and the right to fair and just working conditions under Article 31.

4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

While this initiative will not require additional resources from the EU budget, the measures in this recommendation will mobilise sources of funding at EU, national and regional level.

5. OTHER ELEMENTS

Implementation plans and monitoring, evaluation, and reporting arrangements

The Commission intends to:

- Facilitate peer learning among Member States, higher education institutions and stakeholders, including European Universities alliances on teaching enhancement; mechanisms ensuring the recognition of teaching and involvement in transnational cooperation activities, and providing sustainable career pathways and appropriate talent management measures for academic staff and professional services staff.
- Foster synergies between this proposal and the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe. This could help to ensure improved and consistent careers for academic staff working at higher education and research institutions.
- Facilitate evidence-based policy and monitoring progress of this proposal by mapping, through the European Higher Education Sector Observatory, existing data on higher education career and staffing policy at European, national, and institutional levels. The Commission also plans to identify data gaps and needs and to consider relevant links between the European Higher Education Sector Observatory and the observatory on research careers developed within the European Research Area.

2024/0078 (NLE)

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, in particular Article 292 in conjunction with Article 153(1), points (b) and (i), and Articles 165(4) and 166(4) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) High-quality staff are essential for thriving Union higher education institutions and deeper transnational cooperation between Member States, in line with the European strategy for universities.⁴⁴
- (2) ‘Academic staff’ in higher education should be understood as staff whose primary or major assignment is teaching or research in institutions offering programmes at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels 5 to 8⁴⁵. Staff targeted by this Recommendation should be understood to include staff working at higher education institutions who do both teaching and research, and staff who do teaching only or mostly, regardless of their status. It also includes researchers working at higher education institutions, who may not have a permanent teaching assignment, but who are involved in the life of the institution and might be occasionally involved in teaching.
- (3) Some recommendations include professional services staff who are not strictly considered as ‘academic staff’, but who have extensive high-level expertise in strategic, legal or communication fields, professionals working in areas related to academic tasks but with no direct engagement in them, or higher education professionals with extensive knowledge of higher education and other relevant policy.
- (4) Higher education institutions are experiencing changing conditions and new types of academic activities are being created. Academic staff in higher education are expected to fulfil various roles from traditional education and research to entrepreneurship and innovation, knowledge valorisation, transnational cooperation, business and community engagement⁴⁶, regional and local development, mentoring, administration and management and participation in institutional governance. Those various roles are unevenly recognised. In order to tackle bias in career structures and overall social recognition of research at the expense of teaching and other non-research academic activities, it would be appropriate to promote approaches that acknowledge diverse academic career paths and consider these in staff appraisal and career promotion processes.
- (5) Creating better conditions for academic staff and addressing barriers can help increase the attractiveness of higher education institutions as places of work and enhance their capacity to trigger additional positive spill-over effects, notably on the labour market by stimulating the development of talent. A more valued and supported academic staff can help nurture the workforce needed for the development of regional economies, which are increasingly dependent on knowledge, innovation, and highly skilled people. The importance of attractive and effective higher education institutions has

⁴⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022)16 final.

⁴⁵ [The European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\) | Europass](#).

⁴⁶ The mission of higher education goes beyond the functions of education and research. Business engagement means establishing partnerships between higher education institutions and business, bringing mutual benefits such as access to novel technologies for companies, and access to equipment, expertise or networks beyond academia for higher education institutions. Community engagement means strengthening democratic values and civic engagement, addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, contributing to cultural development, informing public policy and addressing large-scale social challenges.

been especially recognised in regions in a talent development trap or at risk of falling into one, which are lagging in terms of creating new economic opportunities.⁴⁷

- (6) Increasingly strategic transnational activities, including building European Universities alliances⁴⁸ and developing transnational educational programmes, require academic staff, as well as professional services staff to dedicate additional time and energy to those activities on top of core teaching and research. In order to further develop these activities, appraisal and promotion mechanisms need to acknowledge staff involvement in work on transnational cooperation.
- (7) A free and non-discriminatory working environment is an important enabling factor for academic staff to provide high quality teaching. Academic freedom should be protected and promoted to maintain the high level enjoyed by academic staff in the Union. Academic staff and professional services staff may also face challenges of unsatisfactory working conditions⁴⁹, heavy workload and gender or other biases in assessment and recognition. Also, women are more often employed on precarious and temporary contracts than men⁵⁰. To address those challenges, it is necessary to promote competitive, accessible and fair working conditions in academia.
- (8) The Union action towards inclusiveness, diversity, and gender equality in higher education is based on an inclusive excellence approach. It seeks to support excellent higher education while ensuring equality of participation with a special focus on under-represented and disadvantaged communities. In order to address the underrepresentation of certain groups in higher education institutions, in particular in leadership positions, it would be appropriate to promote diversity and inclusion plans at higher education institutions, and in career promotion processes.
- (9) This Recommendation is designed in close synergy with the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe⁵¹, which aims at more attractive research careers in all sectors, including academia, and at a full recognition for all types of career paths. Both recommendations aim at improving working conditions, stability of careers, skills, gender equality, inclusiveness and social protection measures for their respective target groups.
- (10) This Recommendation aims to encourage better recognition of the energy and time that academic staff and other professional services staff devote to transnational cooperation activities, for example the European Universities alliances. For the full roll-out of this initiative⁵², and the encouragement of transnational cooperation activities, including development of joint degrees, full involvement of staff and career

⁴⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Harnessing talent in Europe's regions, 17 January 2023, COM(2023) 32 final.

⁴⁸ The European Universities Initiative is an EU initiative aimed at establishing alliances between higher institutions from across Europe. It is implemented primarily through Erasmus+ funding.

⁴⁹ Including lack of reasonable accommodation measures for persons with disabilities, Employment Equality Directive, 2000/78/EC

⁵⁰ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, She figures 2021 – Gender in research and innovation – Statistics and indicators, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090>.

⁵¹ Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (OJ C, C/2023/1640, 29.12.2023, p. 1).

⁵² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022)16 final.

perspectives for academic and professional services staff involved in the strategic coordination functions should be promoted. Incentivising staff to promote transnational and intersectoral mobility should also greatly contribute to the development of transnational innovative and interdisciplinary educational programmes, for the benefit of all students.

- (11) This Recommendation aims at promoting measures to enhance continuous professional development, and to further acknowledge the variety of activities that academic staff perform. This will allow for full staff mobilisation to develop innovative teaching and learning, stimulate the upskilling and reskilling mindset, and promote the acquisition of skills for the green and digital transitions, including the use of artificial intelligence in teaching.
- (12) This Recommendation aims to promote competitive, fair, inclusive, accessible, safe and non-discriminatory conditions for academic and professional services staff to attract them to and retain them in the higher education sector. Academic staff should be enabled to develop innovative teaching methods in an environment where working conditions are competitive and fair and where fundamental rights are protected and there is no fear of reprisal and/or undue external influence.
- (13) This Recommendation also aims to improve the evidence-base for developing human resources policies and strategies in higher education. Since no internationally comparable data are collected systematically on academic staff and diverging sets of staff categories are used in different higher education systems, it would be appropriate to explore the possibility for collecting more detailed data to sufficiently monitor emerging trends and to take truly evidence-based policy steps for deeper transnational cooperation at the level of the Union.
- (14) In support of this Recommendation, the Commission intends to coordinate, in close cooperation with Member States, higher education institutions and social partners, in the European Education Area Strategic Framework Working Group on Higher Education⁵³, the preparation of guidelines to provide advice how higher education institutions can improve attractiveness of academic and professional support staff careers, and a European competence framework for academic staff, to enhance permeability of careers across sectors, building on existing relevant competence frameworks at Union level, such as the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp).⁵⁴
- (15) The Commission also intends to support the organisation of a dedicated social dialogue at Union level on the careers of academic and professional services staff, facilitate peer learning between Member States on effective mechanisms ensuring recognition of academic and professional services staff engagement in transnational cooperation, and innovative teaching activities; and to support evidence-based policy and monitoring progress by mapping, through the European Higher Education Sector Observatory⁵⁵ existing data on higher education career and staffing policy at European, national, and institutional level, and identifying data gaps and needs.

⁵³ Arrangements under the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 30 September 2020, COM(2020)625 final.

⁵⁴ [ResearchComp: The European Competence Framework for Researchers - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁵⁵ See Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022)16 final. The Commission is setting up the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.

- (16) The Commission fosters synergies with the Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, to ensure improved and consistent careers for academic staff working at higher education institutions and engaged in both teaching and research.
- (17) The Commission intends to further develop, promote, and provide support to transnational educational cooperation and innovative educational excellence through relevant financing sources at Union level, including through the Erasmus+ programme⁵⁶, and encourage Member States to use the Technical Support Instrument to receive tailor-made technical expertise to design and implement the necessary reforms in the higher education area, including by fostering cooperation between policy makers, research and academia and by developing the attractiveness of academic careers,

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

Transnational cooperation

1. It is recommended that Member States promote, recognise and value engagement in deeper transnational cooperation, in particular:
 - (a) encourage and support engagement of academic and professional services staff in deeper transnational cooperation activities such as joint degree programmes or joint education and training offers leading to micro-credentials⁵⁷, at all levels and across all disciplines, by valuing such activities. For example, by:
 - (i) considering the integration of objectives related to transnational educational cooperation in career pathways, and in staffing policy at national and institutional levels;
 - (ii) taking the development of joint transnational educational activities into account in the academic career appraisal of academic staff;
 - (iii) taking into account work related to transnational cooperation in the total working hours of academic staff;
 - (b) pursue the objective, in dialogue with the higher education sector, to develop long-term career perspectives and talent management measures targeting academic and professional services staff involved in the coordination and management of alliances of higher education institutions, such as European Universities alliances;
 - (c) encourage the development and promotion of new opportunities for European and international mobility, offering also alternative forms for those who cannot travel, for academic and professional services staff, also by leveraging existing instruments for career management and labour mobility, such as the Europass

This Observatory is supposed to combine the best of the current EU data tools and capacities in one single place, while further enhancing their use.

⁵⁶ Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (OJ L 189, 28.5.2021, p. 1).

⁵⁷ Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 10).

platform⁵⁸ and the European cooperation network of employment services (EURES)⁵⁹ mobility advisers;

- (d) support higher education institutions to ensure that they can dedicate adequate human resources capacity to transnational cooperation;
- (e) encourage the possibility for academic and professional services staff to practice lifelong learning, including by going on sabbatical leave for the purposes of improving skills necessary for transnational educational activities.

Higher education institutions

2. It is recommended that Member States promote, acknowledge and value diverse academic roles, including innovative and effective teaching, and in particular:

- (a) engage, in dialogue with the higher education sector, with an aim to:
 - (i) ensure that human resources policies in the higher education sector recognise and reward similarly diverse roles of academic staff, such as teaching, research, entrepreneurship and innovation, knowledge valorisation, transnational cooperation, business and community engagement, regional and local development, mentoring, administration and management, participation in institutional governance;
 - (ii) promote approaches, new and existing, that value, acknowledge and reward diverse academic career paths for permeability of careers across the different roles of academic staff as referred to in point 2(a)(i); across various public and private sectors; and across countries, taking into account career breaks⁶⁰ in a transparent manner;
 - (iii) develop practices in the higher education sector, to value teaching enhancement and staff development, and promote parity of esteem for teaching as compared to research, in staff appraisal and promotion;
 - (iv) encourage institutional leadership in higher education institutions to increase and maintain the focus on learning and teaching by giving as much attention to teaching as to research, and to value those who actively champion teaching and learning excellence at higher education institutions;
- (b) develop practices in the higher education sector, in cooperation with the higher education sector, to invest in continuous skills development by:
 - (i) providing appropriate training and support to academic staff conducting teaching activities, including early career staff and part-time teachers;
 - (ii) supporting teaching enhancement, by endorsing research on teaching and experimentation with new pedagogical methods, and creating innovative teaching and learning centres across higher education institutions to assist academic staff with their teaching mission;
 - (iii) providing support for continuous professional development to academic staff in innovative approaches to learning and teaching, including through micro-credentials, to enhance digital and innovative teaching approaches, including leveraging the safe and transparent use of artificial

⁵⁸ [Home | Europass](#).

⁵⁹ [EURES \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁶⁰ For example, due to parenthood and caring responsibilities, health issues.

intelligence, embedding learning for the green transition and sustainable development in their courses⁶¹, inclusive learning approaches addressed to diverse groups of learners, the integration of transnational cooperation within education and training programmes: sharing knowledge through online courses with the rest of the world based on Open Education principles⁶²;

- (c) consider integration of indicators that assess the degree of innovation and quality in teaching and learning into existing quality assurance processes.
3. It is recommended that Member States encourage respect of collective agreements, effective social dialogue, and the autonomy of social partners, and to take support action so that employers provide attractive, inclusive and competitive working conditions, where academic staff are valued, encouraged and supported. Such support action could include:
- (a) improving recruitment practices and working conditions of academic and professional services staff, as well as related funding mechanisms, to make those conditions more transparent, predictable, accessible and stable, especially for early-career staff;
 - (b) providing commensurate remuneration free from gender pay gaps, work-life balance and flexible working conditions of academic and professional services staff that help bring together personal life, family, caring responsibilities, health, safety, and overall wellbeing, without prejudice to careers;
 - (c) providing access to adequate social protection irrespective of the form of employment, without prejudice to the right of Member States to define the fundamental principles of their social security systems. Such measures could pertain to the following branches, insofar as they are provided in the Member States: unemployment benefits; sickness and healthcare benefits; maternity leave; paternity leave and parental leaves and related benefits; invalidity benefits; old-age benefits and survivors' benefits; benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases;
 - (d) providing access to updated, comprehensive, user-friendly and clearly understandable information on their social protection rights and obligations, and to ensure that entitlements – whether acquired through mandatory or voluntary schemes – are preserved, accumulated and/or transferable across all types of employment and self-employment statuses and across borders, economic sectors, throughout the working life or during a certain reference period and between different schemes within a given social protection branch;
 - (e) ensuring that academic staff can engage, at all stages of their careers and whatever their type of employment contract, in teaching and learning, in research, without interference or fear of reprisal by:
 - (i) contributing to the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms promoting and defending academic freedom;

⁶¹ Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development (OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 1).

⁶² Open educational practices represent teaching and learning techniques that draw upon open and participatory technologies and open educational resources to facilitate collaborative and flexible learning.

- (ii) defining frameworks to protect individual members of academic staff against undue external interference and threats;
 - (iii) contributing to transparency in funding or cooperation agreements by applying effective risk management;
 - (f) ensuring gender equality, gender balance, equal opportunities and inclusiveness for academic staff from all backgrounds, including by developing and sharing good practices in higher education regarding gender equality, inclusiveness and diversity and encouraging higher education institutions to either use existing or develop new tools such as Diversity Charters⁶³, codes of conduct, guidance materials or handbooks;
 - (g) ensuring the effectiveness of measures aiming at creating an inclusive working environment by:
 - (i) supporting female academic staff to achieve a high level of academic seniority and senior management/leadership roles;
 - (ii) promoting introduction of gender equality plans and broader diversity and inclusion plans at higher education institutions, and in career promotion processes;
 - (iii) contributing to more supportive and trust-based appraisal practices, prioritising intrinsic motivation, open feedback, and collaboration, including by developing the basis for evidence-based policy making on inclusion and diversity.
4. It is recommended that Member States engage in more evidence-based policymaking aimed at creating competitive, safe, fair and non-discriminatory conditions in academia based on available organisational, national, and European data on higher education career and staffing policy.
5. It is recommended that Member States follow this Recommendation as soon as possible to allow for the full implementation of the priorities of the Council Conclusion on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe⁶⁴. They are invited to regularly inform the Commission, in the context of the European Education Area framework working structures, of the corresponding measures to be taken at the appropriate level to support the objectives of this Recommendation as essential steps towards achieving and further developing the European Education Area.

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council
The President*

⁶³ [The EU Platform of Diversity Charters turns 10! - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/infographic/infographic-diversity-charters-10-years-2012-2022.pdf).

⁶⁴ Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe (OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9).