ETUCE response in the implementation Dialogue on Attracting and Retaining Research Talent in Europe

10 July 2026

Question 1 How can existing European initiatives be better translated into practice to make research careers more attractive, competitive and sustainable?

Dear Commissioner Zaharieva, colleagues, thank you for the opportunity.

ETUCE is the collective, independent and democratic voice of 5 milion academics, teachers and education in Europe. For ETUCE, the central question is not only how Europe attracts research talent, but whether Europe can offer researchers a career worth staying for. That means secure employment, fair salaries, manageable workloads, academic freedom, democratic governance and genuine career progression.

First, existing **European initiatives must be translated into binding and measurable improvements in working conditions**. The Council Recommendation, the European Charter for Researchers, EURAXESS, and the ERA policy agenda all point in the right direction. However the gap between these words and the reality on the ground is stark, researchers will judge them by whether they change their actual employment and professional situation.

Second, **implementation must address precarious work and short-term funding directly**. Short-term contracts, externally funded project employment and unclear career pathways are not temporary inconveniences; they are structural obstacles to attracting and retaining research talent. They particularly affect early-career researchers, women, internationally mobile researchers and those without strong institutional protection. Europe cannot ask researchers to deliver excellence while offering them insecurity as the normal career model.

Third, **implementation requires real social dialogue**. Too often, initiatives are designed at European level, interpreted by Member States, and then implemented by institutions without sufficient involvement of the people whose working lives are affected. We have been consulted in the career framework by the Commission, but not involved in the implementation in any way. Academic and education unions must be involved at all levels: European, national, and institutional. This is not a procedural point; it is a condition for success. Academic and education

unions can identify implementation gaps, monitor whether commitments are respected, and ensure that reforms are not reduced to voluntary HR branding exercises.

So our proposal is concrete: every European initiative on research careers should include a social dialogue mechanism, nothing about us, without us. Implementation indicators on quality employment, and monitoring of precarious contracts and career progression. If Europe wants to be the destination of choice, it must make decent, stable and sustainable research careers the norm, not the exception.

Question 2. How should research career systems evolve to recognise diverse career paths, intersectoral experience and mobility, while removing obstacles to talent circulation?

Thank you. ETUCE acknowledges the recognition of diverse research careers .

But we would add a strong caution: diversity of career paths must not become a justification for fragmented, insecure or individualised employment. Mobility should be a right and an opportunity, not a survival strategy. Researchers should not have to move institution, sector or country simply because stable positions do not exist.

First, mobility must come with rights. Pension portability, recognition of experience, social protection, collective bargaining coverage and transparent recruitment must follow the researcher across borders and sectors.

Second, Academic work as a whole must never be devalued. Teaching, supervision, public engagement, open science, academic service and collegial governance are essential parts of research careers and must count in career assessment.

Third, the voice of researchers and academic staff must be included. Social dialogue with researchers' unions should also be a conditionality gaining access to Horizon grants and the University Alliances for example. In the framing of this second theme, employers, funders and public authorities are mentioned, but academic and education unions are not. That omission matters. If career systems are to be credible and fair, the organised voice of researchers must be part of their design and governance.

Albert Einstein was not only a great scientist; he was also a believer in collective action, and a proud unionist. He was one of the founders of his academic union in Stanford. In 1944, he wrote that it was “urgently necessary” for intellectual workers to organise themselves, not only to protect their professional and economic interests, but also “in the interest of society as a whole.”

If it's good enough for Albert Einstein, it should be good enough for everyone in this room.

Thank you.