



Supporting Researchers at Risk

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# WHY AND HOW TO ENGAGE FOR RESEARCHERS AT RISK

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Seminar report | 19 April 2023 | Gdansk, Poland



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## Introduction

As part of the [Inspireurope+ project](#) (2022-2025), the European University Association (EUA) is organising a series of seminars for leaders of higher education institutions to exchange on strategic approaches for supporting researchers at risk. The first one took place on 19 April 2023 at the Gdańsk University of Technology in Poland. It gathered 18 institutional representatives from 15 institutions from 9 countries. Their different backgrounds and levels of experience on the matter provided for a fruitful exchange and lively discussions as well as a vital networking opportunity.

The seminar was kicked off with the case study of the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences' strategic approach to welcoming researchers at risk, presented by rector Gunnar Yttri. This was followed by plenary and group discussions framed by [a set of recommendations](#) for institutions and policy makers, developed by the Inspire initiative.

The key messages from this seminar are outlined in this report, which will help the Inspireurope+ initiative to further develop policy advocacy and capacity building offers for researchers at risk.

## Case study – Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

The Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (WNU) has been a member of the Norwegian section of Scholars at Risk (SAR) since 2017. In order to host researchers at risk, WNU established a dedicated working group to identify suitable candidates and assist them with practical matters. Two researchers at risk have received a regular two-year work contract, including social insurances, with an additional allowance for visas, travel expenses, temporary housing and unforeseen expenses of the researchers and their families during their stay in Norway.

The profiles of the researchers have been carefully chosen, in order to contribute to the development of a new disciplinary area at the institution. WNU could have, of course, hired any international researchers, but it made a deliberate decision to employ researchers at risk. This requires additional support and commitment from the institution, notably through academic and administrative mentors. Some challenges were identified, which are outside of the institution, namely the application for a permanent residence permit, the high cost of living in Norway and the need for mentors in relation to academic and working life in Norway. While fairly recent, this host arrangement has clearly benefited the researchers, but also the institution.



## Group & plenary discussions on the Inspireurope recommendations

Participants had the opportunity to exchange on their own experiences, guided by a set of [recommendations on expanding opportunities in Europe for researchers at risk](#) developed under the Inspireurope 2019-2022. The exchanges also allowed the consortium to test the recommendations. The first part focussed on the institutional perspective, whereas the second took up national and European aspects of supporting researchers at risk. Below are the key messages from the discussions.

### Part 1: Institutional engagement matters

**Recommendation #1. Acknowledge and support researchers at risk in higher education and research, including as a matter of defending academic freedom, and as a contribution to diversity, equity, and inclusion (& Recommendation #7. Consider intersectionality in the support for researchers at risk)**

- ✓ The academic community in general shows an interest in this topic, with most higher education institutions including references on academic freedom, inclusion and diversity, in their mission statements and other strategic documents. Such statements are usually quite broad without specifically mentioning researchers at risk but rather adopting an all-encompassing, intersectional approach.
- ✓ **More awareness of the potential that researchers at risk have and the added value they can bring to their host institution is still needed.** High level/policy-level statements are an important first step to affirm support for researchers at risk but without concrete initiatives, they do not lead to practical results. Certain staff may not engage in support measures, such as being a mentor, if their efforts are not formally recognised.
- ✓ In order to further acknowledge researchers at risk, **should the term “at risk” be better defined**, for example to match the three categories put forward by SAR<sup>1</sup>, **or should it be left broad**, in order not to exclude any potential “at risk” groups? Should there be a separate strategy for those subjected to conflict-related risks?
- ✓ In addition to supporting individual researchers at risk, **strategic commitment to “universities at risk” needs to be enhanced.**

**Recommendation#4. Facilitate access of researchers at risk to existing European funding programmes**

- ✓ Researchers face many challenges when accessing European funding programmes such as complex application processes, and short contracts. In addition, some countries' national rules for work and residency permits pose additional problems. Submitting such funding proposals is difficult in general for researchers and much more so for researchers at risk.
- ✓ Not all funding programmes have guidelines on equality, diversity and inclusion. **Higher education institutions should implement the [MSCA Guidelines for Inclusion of Researchers at Risk](#) when recruiting researchers.** One possibility would be to make the MSCA guidelines a requirement as part of European university alliances.

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<sup>1</sup> These three categories relate to (a) the content of the scholar's work, (b) the individual's status as an academic/researcher and (c) as a result of their peaceful exercise of basic human rights.

- ✓ **Higher education institutions should inform researchers at risk about funding opportunities** (EU and national fellowship and research programmes) **and provide support where possible**. They can also play an important role in making funding instruments more accessible for researchers at risk.
- ✓ **Funding schemes should allow researchers to apply without already having a host institution.**
- ✓ **Another suggestion was to provide funding schemes for “universities at risk”**, which would allow more people to have access to funding support. One concrete idea could be to twin a university in a safe country with an “at-risk” university or to create an alliance of universities which includes a few that are considered “at-risk”.

Universities in Ukraine require financial support to ensure high quality education during the war, particularly those which have been significantly damaged by the Russian military.

- National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute", Ukraine

#### Recommendation #5. Build capacity to enhance long-term prospects for researchers at risk

- ✓ The measures mentioned under recommendation 5, such as mentors, career guidance, language training, networking and targeted support measures, were considered effective. But they would require the consistent commitment of the institution – which is not always the case, due to changes in institutional leadership, other priorities and lack of resources and funding.
- ✓ Many efforts to enhance the long-term perspectives for researchers at risk succeed only because of staff’s voluntarily engagement. But this is not sustainable. It was suggested that institutions could **start welcoming small numbers of researchers at risk** until they have the capacity to host more.
- ✓ Like many other researchers, not all researchers at risk will succeed in achieving a permanent research position, due to high competition. Host institutions should encourage researchers at risk to consider employment also outside university and research. **Information and advice are provided by national and international initiatives, such as local EURAXESS contact points**. Here and for other issues, exchanges among institutions, institutional networks and alliances could further mutual learning and sharing of resources.
- ✓ **Administrative mentors are needed**, who can assist researchers at risk during and after their placement, on issues in their professional and private lives, e.g., tax forms, housing leases, childcare. Another option would be to set up a “contact point” with adequately trained staff. However, many institutions face funding issues and a lack of administrative personnel to carry out such tasks.
- ✓ Depending on the host country, local authorities can play a crucial role in assisting researchers at risk with issues such as housing, childcare and children’s schooling, was discussed. **More collaboration is needed with local authorities to get them on board so they are aware of the issues facing researchers at risk** and can help universities in a more targeted way.
- ✓ Although encouraging networking with fellow researchers for mutual learning would indeed be useful, for the most part, the numbers of researchers at risk in the

participants' institutions were currently too low to set up such peer learning opportunities at an institutional level.

- ✓ On a very practical level, researchers need **access to modern scientific equipment** during and post their placements to ensure they can carry out their research and apply for competitive positions. **A database of modern scientific equipment** or bank of information on a European level would be helpful.

## Part 2: How to build national and European approaches to supporting researchers at risk in higher education institutions?

### Recommednation#2. Establish a dedicated European fellowship scheme

- ✓ A European fellowship scheme would be a great umbrella scheme, helping to define what “researchers at risk” means across Europe and making it easier for universities wishing to support researchers at risk in countries where national governments are less favourable to them.

### Recommendation #3. Create national support programmes for researchers at risk

- ✓ Not all governments provide the necessary budgets to support researchers at risk, which would be an important condition for such a national programme.
  - In fact, out of the participants, just one example of a national support programme for researchers at risk was shared: the Pause programme in France. It was underlined that a **multi-pronged funding approach** is applied to the PAUSE programme, involving funds from the government, the City of Paris (AMIF), the French National Center for Research (CNRS), the Francophonie University Network (AUF) and donations, managed by the Collège de France. This could be an argument to pitch to policymakers who fear that such a programme would have to be entirely funded by national governments.
- ✓ **Higher education institutions could alert national authorities to shortcomings in framework conditions and legislation that may hinder the hosting of researchers at risk and propose ways to overcome them.**

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- ✓ Although universities can inform policy makers about opportunities and benefits resulting from welcoming international talent, **the creation of such programmes would also be hampered by adverse national political agendas.** In some cases, national level laws may need to be changed in order to create national programmes for researchers at risk.
- ✓ Where national support programmes are not possible, higher education institutions may need to pursue different avenues, such as setting up local-level support programmes.
- ✓ Supporting researchers at risk also through the European university alliances can help to promote the issues towards national governments.

The Sorbonne University is one of the three universities in France which hosts the most researchers at risk, using the PAUSE programme, the European Research Council and self-financing. It has hosted around 15 researchers, including PhDs since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The total number is, however, rather small compared to other countries due to the use of French in research, teaching and every-day life, as well as the low number of research positions in France, a country which has not invested enough for many years in public research. France tends to be attractive for researchers coming from French-speaking countries in North and West Africa.

- Sorbonne University, France

**Recommendation #8. Enhance visa pathways for researchers at risk**

- ✓ The participants agreed that the delivery of visas needs to be accelerated. Common issues causing the delivery of visas to be delayed include excessive paperwork and the involvement of numerous authorities. Moreover, within Europe laws differ from country to country, often complicating the process of obtaining a visa for researchers.
- ✓ Sharing information and expertise on these matters among universities and ministries would be beneficial and could help to promote policy changes. On a European level, an ideal solution would be a single visa and application process for researchers at risk, although this may not be straightforward to achieve.

There is a Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Thessaloniki and the Greek Ministry of Migration to expedite visa processes for researchers with funding for temporary research positions at their institution. This will hopefully be extended to other Greek universities, who are members of SAR Greece.

- University of Thessaloniki, Greece

## Conclusions

Overall, this seminar was considered a successful community building event with all participants rating it as either excellent, very good or good. Moreover, almost 90% of the participants agreed that the seminar sufficiently resourced their questions about expanding institutional opportunities for researchers at risk.

While the participants agreed that the measures recommended by the Inspireurope project would be effective if executed, this can only happen if there is strategic commitment to and budget for researchers at risk in European higher education institutions. In particular, they underlined the need for more flexible and less bureaucratic procedures when it comes to visas and funding applications as well as enhanced collaboration with local authorities. In certain countries, national agendas do not lend themselves to supporting researchers at risk and thus the role of a European-level scheme/support and collaboration within European university alliances was deemed critical.

Over the course of the project, three more seminars will be held, which will focus on strengthening long-term prospects for researchers at risk as well as the needs of host institutions in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, who may not enjoy the same resources or support as institutions in Northern and Western Europe. The outcomes of this first seminar highlighted the need to engage more with decision-makers with direct contact with researchers at risk, such as from international offices and equality, inclusion and diversity departments.

The seminar was a milestone for the University of Oviedo's strategic policy. It revealed a new priority - supporting researchers at risk - that we had overlooked and not clearly defined. Although we value research and talent attraction, our assistance programs for vulnerable researchers were part of broader equality, diversity and inclusion strategies, rather than a specific one for the researcher-at-risk profile. By learning about their unique needs, especially in light of the Ukraine war, we can explore ways to integrate this factor into our policies, especially through the inter-university cooperation of the INGENIUM Alliance that we lead. This seminar will inspire us to engage the European universities initiative - via INGENIUM - in addressing this issue.

- University of Oviedo, Spain



## List of participants

Representative	Position	Institution	Country
Elisa Glangeaud	Director International Outreach, coordinator refugee Committee	Université Grenoble Alpes	France
Sebastien Le Picard	Vice President for European projects	University of Rennes	France
Bernold Hasenknopf	Professor and Senior Advisor for European Commitment - President's Office	Sorbonne University	France
Malamati Tsapoutzoglou	Inspireurope+ consortium member	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki	Greece
Gunar Yttri	Rector	Western Norway University of Applied Sciences	Norway
Geir Resaland	Vice-rector	Western Norway University of Applied Sciences	Norway
Anna Chełmońska-Soyta	Vice-Rector for Internationalisation	Wroclaw University of Environmental and Life Sciences	Poland
Beata Kowalska	Academic Ombudsperson/University professor	Jagiellonian University	Poland
Dariusz Mikielwicz	Vice Rector for Organisation and Development	Gdansk University of Technology	Poland
Maria Guerreiro	Vice Rector	ISCTE	Portugal
Anna Soos	Vice Rector	Babes Bolyai University	Romania
Jesús Daniel Santos Rodríguez	Vice Rector for Internationalisation	University of Oviedo	Spain
Alberto Esparza Hueto	Policy and Project Officer	University of Oviedo	Spain
Juan Francisco Gutiérrez Lozano	Vice-Rector for Communication	University of Malaga	Spain
Ayşe Zişan Furat	Head of the International Academic Relations Unit	Istanbul University	Türkiye
Semih Aktekin	Rector	Nevsehir Haci bekras Veli University	Türkiye
Yevgen Sokol	Rector	National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute"	Ukraine
Gennadiy Khyapunov	Vice-Rector for International Relations	National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute"	Ukraine



Participants in seminar 1, Gdańsk University of Technology, Poland, 19 April 2023