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Third Inspireurope+ leadership roundtable on enhancing support for researchers at risk

Seminar report of the pre-event to the 2024 Philipp Schwartz and Inspireurope Stakeholder Forum, 18 April 2024, 10:45 – 13:15, Telekom Hauptstadtrepräsentanz, Französische Str. 33a-c, Berlin



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Background

As part of the [Inspireurope+ project](#) (2022-2025), the European University Association (EUA) has been organising a series of four seminars for leaders of higher education institutions, taking place/tentatively scheduled for:

1. April 2023, back-to-back with the EUA annual conference, Gdansk, Poland.
2. October 2023, co-organised with Aristotele University, Thessaloniki, Greece.
3. April 2024, back-to-back with the Philipp Schwartz and Inspireurope Stakeholder Forum, Berlin, Germany.
4. Month 29 (Feb 2025).

The aim of the leadership roundtables is to bring together higher education institutions to exchange on strategic approaches for supporting researchers at risk, with particular focus on raising awareness and enhancing institutional commitment in the European higher education sector. Participants are higher education leaders, i.e. level of rector or vice-rector, as well as director levels.

Each roundtable aims to include around 20-25 participants, who are selected based on a call for expression of interest to participate, which includes questions on their level of experience in/their institutions' current engagement with supporting researchers at risk.

To maximise participation, roundtables are - when possible - scheduled to take place back-to-back with other Inspireurope+, or EUA events, the latter often already involving a large number of institutional leaders.

The Inspireurope [recommendations on expanding opportunities in Europe for researchers at risk](#) developed under the predecessor project (2019-2022) set the background of the discussion. These recommendations address both the policy levels as well as higher education institutions, the latter being the explicit focus of the Inspireurope+ roundtables. Through discussion with institutional leadership, the recommendations for higher education institutions are tested and further developed, feeding into updated policy recommendations to higher education institution-level decision makers at the end of the project (M34).

Topics of the roundtables include (in the order of roundtables scheduled):

1. Why and how to engage support for researchers at risk (Practical recommendations for hosting researchers at risk)
2. Improving support in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe (leadership roundtable co-hosted by AUTH)
3. Connecting support for researchers at risk to institutional values and strategies

Introduction

The third leadership roundtable took place as a pre-event to the 2024 Philipp Schwartz and Inspireurope Stakeholder Forum, at Telekom Hauptstadtrepräsentanz in Berlin. The topic of the roundtable was "Connecting support for researchers at risk to institutional values and strategies".

The discussion in the third roundtable focussed specifically on the first of the Inspireurope recommendations, namely:

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

This recommendation calls upon higher education institutions to:

- Value and support academic freedom and solidarity amongst academics, which are frequently referenced by universities as uncontested values of the higher education community.
- Clearly reference protection of academic freedom and solidarity with fellow academics in mission and value statements, and in strategies and actions, including those for internationalisation and equity, inclusion and diversity, which many European higher education institutions already have in place.
- Recognise the contribution that researchers at risk bring to the institution and its research, education, and third mission, as international scholars.
- Ensure that academic freedom and solidarity with fellow academics are understood and promoted by all members of the institution, and clearly articulated by university stakeholders in their external cooperation with national and international partners across academia, society and industry.
- Further develop and enhance the means and capacities of universities to act upon such values, with their support for researchers at risk as one of the measures.
- Share their experience through peer learning and training activities as well as public outreach.

Despite the focus on recommendation 1, the discussion in the seminar also touched upon other, interconnected parts of the [recommendations paper](#), which was shared with participants in a briefing before the event.

Participants were selected through a call for applications to participate, based on their level of experience with the topic, and with the aim of reaching a good geographical balance. Nineteen project-external representatives from 18 institutions in 13 countries were selected and signed up for the event, three of which unfortunately cancelled at the very last minute due to health reasons or travel issues. All participants had either university rector, vice-rector, or director profile. In addition, five project partner representatives and one representative from the European Commission (DG EAC) also joined the event¹.

The meeting was kicked off with a tour de table and an ice breaker activity, followed by a brief input presentation on the Inspireurope+ project, its recommendations, and the aims of the event. This was followed by two institutional case studies. Afterward, participants were grouped into roundtables for in-depth discussions.²

Ice-breaker

Most participants did not know each other before the meeting. In order to quickly introduce themselves and their institutions' approach to researchers at risk, two brief rounds of ice breaker activity kicked off the seminar. In each round participants were asked to join one of four flipcharts in

¹ Please see annex II – participant list – for further details.

² Please see annex I – programme – for further details.

the room, depending on which best described the situation at their institution. After joining the flipcharts, participants were given a few minutes each round to quickly talk to each other and pitch their institutions' approach.

Round 1 – your institution's approach to researchers at risk. Flipchart options included:

- New to the topic,
- Host to small number of researchers at risk,
- Host to 10+ researchers at risk,
- Host and coordinating regional/national activities for researchers at risk.

The majority of participants identified as either "hosting a small number of researchers at risk" or "hosting and coordinating regional/national activities for researchers at risk".

Round 2 – strategic approach to support for researchers at risk. Flipchart options included:

- No institutional strategy - bottom-up support activities run by individual staff members,
- Part of the overarching strategy or (third) mission of the institution,
- Part of diversity, equity and inclusion strategy or measures,
- Part of internationalisation and global outreach strategy or measures.

Interestingly, while the seminar organisers had expected a large share of institutions to join the option "diversity, equity and inclusion strategy", it turned out that most participants frame their approach to supporting researchers at risk as "part of internationalisation and global outreach strategy or measures".



Participants pitching their institutions' strategic approaches and experience with researchers at risk during the ice-breaker activity.

Case studies

Two cases of central level support to researchers at risk were presented by two university vice presidents: an approach framed by public duty, equality and diversity at Maynooth University; and another framed by a history of displacement as well as a global strategy at Strasbourg University.

Excellence in Exile at Maynooth University, Ireland

Gemma Irvine, Vice-President for Equality & Diversity

All public bodies in Ireland have responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. This is a legal obligation, called the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. This duty frames the approach of Maynooth University (MU).

MU is a designated University of Sanctuary with student scholarships for international protection applicants in Ireland. It hosts Scholars at Risk (SAR) Europe, the European office of the Global SAR network. MU currently hosts a makes use of a SAR fellowship to host a researcher at risk and their family and provides extensive, personalised support to both.. MU also ran the National Student and Researcher Helpdesk for people displaced from Ukraine in 2022 and hosted 1,200 Ukrainians in campus accommodation. MU engages actively with the local authority as part of its' support for at-risk researchers and students.

Support for researchers at risk is framed as part of the overarching MU Strategic Plan 2023 – 2028, wherein **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)** is a key enabler. Part of this mission is to establish a National Centre of Excellence for Inclusive Higher Education, and to develop a culture in which consideration of EDI is embedded across all university activities, and enhanced by EDI professional development support.

Amongst the challenges in supporting researchers at risk (as well as students at risk) faced by the institution, Gemma mentioned the difficulty to upscale the excellence in support currently offered to a relatively small number of fellows. This links to funding in general, as well as staff resources in particular.

Welcoming researchers at risk at University of Strasbourg, France

Mathieu Schneider, Vice-President for Culture, Science and Society

The approach to supporting researchers and students at risk is linked to the history of University of Strasbourg: the institution was in exile from 1939 on, with 2,000 students & professors fleeing to their host university in Clermont-Ferrand. Strasbourg University is furthermore the only institution in France to have been decorated with the Medal of Resistance.

Support for researchers at risk at Strasbourg University is framed by the institution's **global strategy**. This includes a comprehensive institutional policy for students and scholars "in exile", which was built upon a bottom-up support programme for refugee students in 2017. Thanks to this policy, the university has an annual dedicated budget of EUR60k, spent e.g. on integration and bridging courses, a help desk and resource centre for students and scholars at risk with dedicated staff, a steering committee including the CROUS (national social and student-life department) and other important stakeholders inside and outside of the institution (e.g. local authorities).

The institution also set up a successful fundraising programme at the University Foundation, which has raised EUR120k since 2017 through mostly private donors, including staff, and together with the French national support programme PAUSE the university runs a fund for researchers in exile with a

budget of nearly EUR100k per year. Mathieu also spearheads the Reseau MENs, an initiative to coordinate support for refugee students, nowadays involving close to 50 French institutions.

The challenges in supporting researchers at risk reported by the University of Strasbourg were similar to those mentioned by Maynooth University – despite its dedicated budgets, more could be done. Mathieu in addition mentioned challenges around long-term integration, and challenges related to changing political contexts.

Roundtable discussions

Participants were pre-allocated to three tables, mixing their level of experience, countries, gender, etc. Each table was joined by one facilitator to keep discussions on track. One rapporteur per table was nominated to present the outcomes of the discussion. Four discussion questions were raised - on the one hand aiming to facilitate networking and awareness raising amongst participants, and on the other to gather input for the update of Inspireurope recommendations at the end of the project.

Summary of discussion from all tables:

General remarks:

- Size and university type matters in framing support:
 - Some participants represented private universities, whereas others came from public universities and the status of an institution impacts support for researchers at risk, e.g. in terms of funding and in terms of additional support.
- Attention to language was emphasized, as the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion can sometimes be stigmatizing for researchers at risk.
- It was also noted that some researchers at risk do not want to be labelled as advocates for academic freedom, they just want to continue with their research in safety.

1. Where to start and how to frame support to researchers at risk?

- Amongst participants, there was a wide diversity of approaches to strategic level support for researchers at risk.
 - E.g. on table 1, two institutions (University of Gothenburg and HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland) framed support for researchers at risk from an internationalization point of view, whereas other institutions associated it with equality diversity and inclusion agendas (Maynooth University) or with the university's third mission (Epoka University).
- Participants agreed that in practice it does not really matter where support for researchers at risk is based (EDI, global, third mission...). However, it is necessary to put in place a strategic approach to create and implement support across the entire institution.
- An initial, bottom-up action (e.g. project) can start a process, but it is very important to have strategic level support to enable long-term sustainable support.
- In terms of operational staff, it is often diversity offices which are responsible for the institutional action in support of researchers at risk. The group agreed that it can be quite challenging as the needs of researchers vary, including in terms of cultural sensitivity and awareness. In this regard, it is recommendable that different offices across the institution communicate and share experiences on a regular basis in order to provide the best possible support and to support each other in their work.

- This led to the discussion about what kind of competence would be most suitable for the staff involved in support for researchers at risk. One point was the importance of someone from the region where the researchers at risk origin from, or someone with a long track record of working with that region . The HEIs in the group shared what worked well in their case – e.g. engaging a Ukrainian fellow to help the team supporting Ukrainian scholars, different relevant offices having regular meetings to share experiences, etc.

2. How to build a culture of academic freedom and solidarity across the institution?

- A combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches usually works best in creating buy-in and support across the institution, to ensure a cohesive approach to support for researchers at risk.
- In relation to building a culture of academic freedom and solidarity across the institution, it was noted that the voices of those who have been deprived of academic freedom should be central to dialogue on implementing academic freedom.
- Participants agreed that it is important to continuously explain institutional values such as academic freedom and why they matter for the institution and its members, and not only concern researchers at risk.
- The group shared several examples from their own experience on how to do so, such as
 - Open talks by researchers at risk to staff and students
 - International/intercultural events with researchers at risk
 - Consciously creating mixed teams– including staff of different backgrounds in the broadest possible sense

3. What role can universities play towards national policy levels?

- Actors at the national policy levels need to be made aware of the work institutions are doing for researchers at risk, and how policies impact what institutions can and cannot do.
 - This links to the challenge of funding and budget restraints but also to showcasing the positive impact researchers at risk have on institutions, their community and the overall economy.
 - For example, it was suggested that institutions could develop policy briefs on the topic (some participants had good experience, some were sceptical about the potential impact on their national policy levels).
 - Lobbying efforts of institutions for students at risk created concrete policy change in France – and it is possible to replicate this in other countries. It should be noted that a large share of institutions in France are organised in the MEnS initiative, and could use this forum as an advocacy platform, which contributed to the success of lobbying efforts there. However, institutions could explore whether similar groups in their own national contexts could be utilised for advocacy purposes.
- Institutions can collaborate with national bodies/agencies (an example of successful practice was given for TH Wildau working with DAAD).
- Universities could engage beyond academia with different sectors (private, civil society, local/national authorities) to expand their support for researchers, but also to advocate policy change.

4. Solved and unsolved challenges – your additional recommendations to your colleagues.

- Support for researchers at risk should be tied to and framed by research excellence, in addition to solidarity:
 - “Inclusive excellence” recognises diversity of thoughts and experiences in addition to excellent research careers.

- To enhance funding, institutions should explore the possibilities of fundraising through donations etc.
- Intersectionality, e.g. at-risk status coupled with gender issues – some participants mentioned the issue of discriminatory approaches towards female researchers at risk in terms of upward mobility and the difficulties in obtaining more senior positions. There needs to be awareness of such intersectionality when supporting the target group.



Participants presenting the outcome of the discussion at their roundtable.

Conclusions

Participants' different backgrounds, approaches to and levels of experience with researchers at risk provided for a fruitful exchange as well as a vital networking opportunity. As participants were all from high level positions at higher education institutions, the discussion was truly peer-to-peer and lively. Participants continued their discussion beyond the timeframe of the seminar, and were seen networking throughout the PSI and Inspireurope+ Forum.

Support for researchers at risk is clearly linked to institutional values for all participants – but linked to different frameworks and narratives: more often found in the context of internationalisation than EDI policies. No matter the framework, it is necessary to put in place a strategic approach in order to ensure implementation and buy in across the institution, and beyond.

Challenges faced are similar across countries. There is a need to enhance support schemes at national and European levels. Institutions have a role to play in advocating at the national policy level, sharing challenges faced, and showcasing the positive impact of supporting researchers at risk. Events and activities such as the Inspireurope+ forum and the leadership roundtable provide a necessary and vital space within which these discussions can take place.

Annexes

Annex I – Programme

From 10:15	Registration and welcome coffee
10:45	Welcome and introduction to the Inspireurope project <i>Michael Gaebel, EUA</i>
10:50	Tour de table and ice breaker activity <i>Chaired by Michael Gaebel, EUA</i>
11:15	Inspireurope recommendations <i>Henriette Stoeber, EUA</i>
11:25	Case studies: strategic support for researchers at risk at institutional level <i>Chaired by Henriette Stoeber, EUA</i>
	Maynooth University - National University of Ireland <i>Gemma Irvine, Vice-President for Equality & Diversity</i>
	University of Strasbourg, France <i>Mathieu Schneider, Vice-President for Culture, Science and Society</i>
12:05	Discussion in four roundtables: enhancing support for researchers at risk <i>Chaired by Henriette Stoeber, EUA</i>
13:10	Summary and next steps <i>Michael Gaebel, EUA</i>
13:15	Lunch
14:00	Conference start: PSI and Inspireurope+ Forum 2024

Annex II- List of participants (by country)

Ahmet Oztas	Epoka University, Albania Rector
Niuton Mulleti	Epoka University, Albania Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs
Oleksandr Shtokvych	Central European University, Austria Head of Secretariat - Open Society University Network (OSUN) & Director, OSUN Threatened Scholars Integration Initiative
Michael Gaebel	European University Association, Belgium Director, Higher Education Policy Unit
Marija Mitic	European Commission, DG EAC, Belgium Policy Analyst, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
Henriette Stoeber	European University Association, Belgium Policy Analyst, Higher Education Policy Unit
Eva Voldřichová Beránková	Charles University, Czech Republic Vice-Rector for International Affairs
Hanna Snellman	University of Helsinki, Finland Vice-Rector
Mathieu Schneider	University of Strasbourg, Réseau MEnS, France Vice-President for Culture, Science and society
Marcus Frohme	Technische Hochschule Wildau, Germany Head of Department Molecular Biotechnology and Functional Genomics, Chair of the Senate
Andrea Lenschow	University of Osnabrück, Germany Vice-President for Internationalisation & Diversity
Michael Paulus	University of Rostock, Germany Director Rostock International House
Frank Geary	Scholars at Risk Europe, Ireland Director
Gemma Irvine	Maynooth University - National University of Ireland Vice-President for Equality & Diversity

Sarah Field	Scholars at Risk Europe, Ireland Policy & Programme Manager
Marco Borraccetti	University of Bologna, Italy Delegate of the Rector for Refugees, Delegate for International Agreements and Networks
Arturas Razbadauskas	Klaipeda University, Lithuania Rector
Mihnea Costoiu	National University of Science and Technology - Politehnica Bucharest, Romania Rector
Karolina Catoni	University of Gothenburg, Sweden Acting Head of the International Centre, Coordinator of SAR Sweden
Rebecka Lettevall	Malmö University, Sweden Pro Vice-Chancellor of Global Engagement and Human Rights
Florence Balthasar	Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland Head of International Affairs, Co-Chair SAR Switzerland
Luna Iacopini	HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland Head of International Relations
Rajani Naidoo	University of Exeter Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People and Culture
Matthias Ruth	University of York, United Kingdom Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research
Robert Quinn	Scholars at Risk, United States Executive Director