

Union representation in academia: From lecture halls to labour halls

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Abstract

This article explores union representation in academia across Europe, focusing on public universities. Despite academia's seemingly favourable conditions for unionisation, such as high levels of formal education and stable employment, the sector faces unique challenges. The study examines how unions are organised, their bargaining counterparts, the collective agreements they negotiate, and the limitations they face. It compares academic trade unions in five European regions: North (Denmark and Sweden), Centre (Belgium and Germany), South (Spain and Portugal), East (Slovenia and Hungary), and West (Ireland and the UK). Key issues include the impact of market logic and digitalisation on academic work, the increasingly precarious nature of employment relationships, and the challenges of maintaining academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The article highlights the issue of academia being both a privileged and individualistic occupation, which complicates collective action. It also addresses the role of trade unions in university governance. The article generates focused questions for further empirical study on how trade unions are adapting to the changing context of work in academia, providing insights into contemporary trade unionism in the public sector.

Keywords

Trade union representation, academia, collective bargaining, academic freedom, public sector

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I. Introduction: An exploratory study of trade union representation in academia

Despite extensive study of collective labour relations in various sectors, academia remains under-researched.¹ Existing studies on academic work often focus on two areas: the high demands placed on academic staff, and the increasingly precarious working conditions (insecurity, stress, work-life balance difficulties, and lack of inclusion/diversity);² or on academic freedom, a right protected under the Constitutions of many EU countries and fundamental to the European Higher Education Area.³ This focus is partly due to traditional labour law research prioritising marginalised or underrepresented groups. Academics, by contrast, are a relatively privileged cohort with high levels of education, good pay, stable, standardised terms of work, and generally work in the public sector where unions are strongest across Europe. Universities are also quite ‘traditional’ workplaces (where a large group of employees gather at a physical location). These factors – public sector employment, standardised terms and conditions of employment, and large, traditional workplaces – create favourable conditions for trade union organisation.

For the purposes of this research, we are adhering to the OECD definition of ‘academics’ as personnel whose primary or major assignment is instruction (teaching) and/or research.⁴ Consequently, we do not include other university staff, such as professional or administrative support staff. We are also concentrating on ‘academics’ with ‘tenure’. This term is somewhat challenging to define precisely but generally refers to those with indefinite/permanent contracts of employment.⁵ We are not focusing on university academics with more precarious terms and conditions of employment. This is because, first, there is already extensive literature on this group of workers, including excellent contributions in this special issue, and secondly, the issue of precarity is so vast and significant that it would overshadow any other topics we could examine in this study.⁶ Furthermore, tenured academics typically dominate union structures and bargaining agendas. Therefore, understanding their specific industrial relations position is a prerequisite for understanding how unions shape their strategies towards the sector as a whole, including their approach to representing precarious and non-standard staff. However, we do consider the issue of precarity in universities in the context of its impact on labour relations within institutions and, particularly, its influence on the overall strategy of trade unions in the sector. Our focus is on public/State universities,⁷ excluding other forms of higher and further education institutions.

We have identified above the factors that should create favourable conditions for trade union organisation, facilitating both the recruitment of members, and the negotiation of collective agreements on their behalf. Paradoxically, however, academia is also a highly individualistic

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1. Research is more likely to be found in journals focusing on education policy than in those examining labour law/relations.
 2. Lopes, A. and Dewan, I.A., ‘Precarious Pedagogies? The Impact of Casual and Zero-Hour Contracts in Higher Education’ (2015) 7(Fall) *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 28–42.
 3. See Coppedge, M., et al. (2023), ‘V-Dem Codebook v13’, *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*.
 4. OECD (2024), ‘The state of academic careers in OECD countries: An evidence review’, OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 91.
 5. So, we exclude researchers who work on fixed-term contracts (e.g., who may work on one funded project for a period, and then start a new contract for a different project).
 6. See the excellent collection Strachan, G. (ed) *Research Handbook on Academic Labour Markets* (Edward Elgar 2024).
 7. With this designation we encompass all those cases where Universities’ resources (to pay salaries and finance day-to-day activities) are dependent largely on State funding.

occupation,⁸ marked by competition for research funding, promotion, and career progression, which complicates collective organisation. These challenges are compounded by post-Covid remote working, the diversification of contractual relationships (e.g., teaching-only contracts), and market-based, public sector reform agendas that pose challenges to traditional union organisation,⁹ resulting in a state of flux for the sector.

Our research aims to fill a gap in the literature regarding trade union organisation in the European academic context. There is somewhat more available from Canada and the USA,¹⁰ but comparisons with North America are difficult due to acute differences in academic systems. We analyse and compare academic unions in ten countries across five European regions: North (Denmark and Sweden), Centre (Belgium and Germany), South (Spain and Portugal), East (Slovenia and Hungary), and West (Ireland and the UK).

This article maps the core features of employment relations in these countries by addressing: union organisation; bargaining counterparts (State, universities, and/or employer associations); the level of collective bargaining; union density and bargaining coverage; and any operational limitations on union action. Given the breadth of challenges identified—ranging from digitalisation to marketisation—it is important to clarify that our primary aim is mapping and hypothesis-building, rather than providing an exhaustive analysis of each individual theme. The key aim is to generate and refine focused hypotheses and questions for a broader empirical study on how trade unions are responding to the changing nature of academic work.

The article is set out as follows. Section II sets out some of the main contemporary challenges faced by academics and their representatives, and why these are of interest to labour law and industrial relations researchers. Section III presents a ‘mapping exercise’ in respect of our chosen countries, and outlines the main features of academic trade unionism in each. Section IV, then, constructs some questions/hypotheses for further empirical exploration; based on the features of industrial relations in each country (section III), we explore how we might expect trade unions to respond to the challenges we have outlined (in section II).

2. Why research trade unions and industrial relations in academia?

Focusing on collective representation in academia will provide important insights into understanding contemporary trade unionism in Europe, particularly in the public sector.

A. Academic freedom and governance

First, the unionisation of academics cannot be addressed without referring to academic freedom, one of the fundamental features of the European Higher Education Area,¹¹ which enjoys protection

8. Ekman, M., Lindgren, M., and Packendorff, J. ‘Universities need leadership, academics need management: discursive tensions and voids in the deregulation of Swedish higher education legislation’ (2018) 75 *Higher Education* 299–321.

9. Wickens, C. M., ‘The organizational impact of university labor unions’ (2008) 56 *Higher Education* 545–564; Ivancheva, M. (2020) ‘The casualization, digitalization, and outsourcing of academic labour: a wake-up call for trade unions’ FocaalBlog (<https://www.focaalblog.com/2020/03/20/mariya-ivancheva-the-casualization-digitalization-and-outsourcing-of-academic-labour-a-wake-up-call-for-trade-unions/>) (accessed 11.1.2026).

10. See Robinson, D. ‘Academic staff trade unions: the past, present and future of faculty unionisation in Canada’ in G. Strachan (ed) *Research Handbook on Academic Labour Markets* (Edward Elgar 2024), 118–130.

11. Timbermont, E., ‘Academic freedom as a fundamental feature of academia: a European Union perspective’ (2022) 36(2) *Higher Education Policy* 394–410.

under the Constitution of several EU countries.¹² Academic freedom (or autonomy) can be conceived of both at the level of the *individual* academic, and at the level of the *institution*.¹³ The individual level is broadly understood as encompassing freedom of speech, thought, learning, and research, but it also includes *the right of academics to participate in institutional governance*.¹⁴ The connection with freedom of association is clear, as individual academic freedom implies that academics need to *participate in the governance of their institutions and enjoy employment security*,¹⁵ and have the right to, without restriction, ‘express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work’ and ‘participate in professional or representative academic bodies’.¹⁶

The link between the *institutional* dimensions of academic freedom¹⁷ (encompassing organisational, financial, and recruitment autonomy) and collective bargaining is even clearer. As the European Commission has stressed, ‘academic freedom cannot be isolated from institutional autonomy, nor from the participation of students and staff in higher education governance’.¹⁸ Academics, to independently research, require a:

‘just and open system of career development, including fair procedures for appointment, tenure where applicable, promotion, dismissal, and other related matters and an effective, fair and just system of labour relations within the institution.’¹⁹

As these issues – the cornerstones of both individual and institutional freedom – are the ‘bread and butter’ of collective bargaining, it is clear why there is an urgent need to analyse the right to freedom of association (and the related role of collective bargaining) in academia.

B. Precarity and work restructuring

Secondly, there is a need to focus on the increasing precarity of academic work.²⁰ Although this research focuses on ‘tenured’ academics (those with indefinite contracts), we investigate the impact of precarity *on this group*, including: changes to the *concept* of academic tenure (e.g.,

12. Karran, T., ‘Academic Freedom in Europe: A Preliminary Comparative Analysis’ (2007) 20 *Higher Education Policy* 289–313. Academic freedom is protected, in some way, by the Constitutions of seven of our case study countries (BE; DE; ESP, HU; PT, SI, SE); it is not protected in the Constitutions of IE or DK; and the UK has no written Constitution. Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights also states that ‘academic freedom shall be respected’.
13. Altbach, P.G., ‘Academic freedom: International realities and challenges’ (2001) 41 *Higher Education* 205–219. The meaning of academic freedom varies according to history, location, and culture (see Timbermont, (2022), and Stachowiak-Kudła, M. et al, (2023) ‘Academic Freedom as a Defensive Right’ 15 *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 161–190.
14. Communication from the European Commission on a European Strategy for Universities COM(2022) 16 Final, para 4.3 (emphasis added).
15. Vatansever, A., ‘Introduction’, in A. Vatansever and A. Kölemen (eds) *Academic Freedom and Precarity in the Global North* (Routledge 2022), 1–15 (emphasis added).
16. Part VI, A. No 27, UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997).
17. ‘[T]hat degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision-making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, [and] management’; UNESCO Recommendation (1997), Part V, A. No 17.
18. N 14 above. Equally, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) explicitly links the concepts in calling for the strengthening of ‘academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and other fundamental values’ (<https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/news/etuice/5415-trade-unions-of-the-higher-education-and-research-sectors-call-the-ministers-of-the-bologna-process-to-provide-effective-support-to-academics>; accessed 1.11.2025).
19. UNESCO Recommendation (1997), Part IX, A. No 40–43.
20. For a global perspective, see OECD (2024), *The state of academic careers in OECD countries: An evidence review*, (OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 91).

where academics with indefinite contracts of employment can be made redundant); and the *impact of casual academic labour on 'tenured' academics*²¹ (e.g., the use by universities of casual labour to 'outsource' academic work).²² The OECD notes that while tenured positions tend to be regulated 'at the *system or sector level*', *institutions* retain more control over temporary and precarious contracts.²³ It is important, therefore, to research the role of collective employment relations in managing these challenges.

C. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

We must also pay close attention to EDI issues. Challenges related to gender inequality²⁴ and burnout (exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the added stress of providing online teaching in an, often, adverse physical and social environment) remain significant.²⁵ Universities are increasingly aware of the necessity to combat inequalities related to racial and ethnic origin, disability, and sexual orientation. However, do these strategies include a role for trade unions? If so, are unions effectively representing members on these issues? These are important questions, also applicable in many other sectors of employment, for this research to explore.

D. Individualism and digitalisation

Academia has long been described as an individualistic profession, where the individualised nature of the work,²⁶ combined with academics' identification with their discipline or employer university,²⁷ can lead to a reluctance to participate in collective action. The 'individualisation of work' thesis, and the implications of this for trade union organisation and collective relations, is a matter of immense importance in industrial relations and labour law scholarship.²⁸

Moreover, the digitalisation of work²⁹ reflects a new challenge that exacerbates this individualism. This can facilitate different forms of outsourcing (e.g., recorded lectures replacing academics).

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21. Numerous studies evidence the feelings of uncertainty regarding the future, as well as work-related anxiety and depression on the part of academic workers; see, for example, Ortleib, R., and Weiss, S., 'What makes academic careers less insecure? The role of individual-level antecedents' (2018) 76 *Higher Education* 571–587.
 22. Swartz, R. et al., 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Dilemmas Regarding the Purpose of Public Universities in South Africa' (2019) 77(4) *Higher Education* 567–83.
 23. OECD (2024), n 20 p 13 (emphasis added).
 24. Often linked with caring responsibilities; see Cahill, B.P. et al. (2018), 'Increasing Awareness of Researcher Mental Health', *EuroScience Open Forum 2018* (ESOF 2018).
 25. Research suggests that female academics suffered disproportionately in trying to balance professional and personal life during the pandemic; Leal Filho, W., Wall, T., Salvia, A.L. et al. 'The impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on the work of academic staff at higher education institutions: an international assessment' (2025) 27 *Environ Dev Sustain* 13973–13999; O'Sullivan, M., et al., 'Employer-led flexibility, working time uncertainty, and trade union responses: The case of academics, teachers and school secretaries in Ireland' (2021) 63(1) *Journal of Industrial Relations* 49–72.
 26. Bergfeld, M., "'Do you believe in life after work?'" The University and College Union strike in Britain' (2018) 24(2) *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 233–236.
 27. Cassel, M., and Halaseh, O., 'The Impact of Unionization on University Performance' (2014) 6(3) *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy* 1–25.
 28. Bogg, A., 'Individualism' and 'Collectivism' in Collective Labour Law' (2107) 46(1) *Industrial Law Journal* 72–108; Doherty, M., 'When the working day is through: The end of work as identity?' (2009) 23(1) *Work, Employment and Society* 84–102.
 29. There is a vast, and quickly growing, literature on this topic; we can direct readers to the Eurofound hub on this topic as a starting point: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/topic/digitalisation> (accessed 11.1.2026).

The potential benefits of digitalisation in facilitating remote work (less commuting, and the potential for better work-life balance) must be weighed against the downsides for academics; already quite an individualised occupation, remote working can lead to isolation from colleagues and disconnection from workplace institutions (including trade unions). More specifically, digitalisation poses a danger to collective union action, as technology and outsourcing could be used to defeat strikes or marking boycotts.³⁰ This research project will shed further light on the impact of digitalisation on trade union activity, and collective relations, more generally.

E. Market logic and managerialism

Finally, and crucially, the overarching issue confronting academics and their representatives is the influence of a market logic on the management of universities.³¹ We use ‘market logic’ as an umbrella term for several interrelated issues:

1. **Managerialism and Financialisation:** The emphasis on a managerialist approach, with a focus on (numerical) flexibility, and using New Public Management reforms³² is driven by increasing global competition in the sector, which has ‘led to higher education institutions adopting business-like organisational approaches and entrepreneurial behaviour to maximise their income’ (which drives, and is driven by, more quantitative targets and managerialism).³³ These processes are sometimes referred to the ‘financialisation’ of the university sector, epitomised by increasing focus on quantitative performance metrics.³⁴
2. **Stratification and Surveillance:** This logic creates *greater vertical stratification in the institutional hierarchy*,³⁵ and bifurcation *within* institutions (e.g., between research- and teaching-focused academics). The obsession with rankings and targets (produced by profit-making, private enterprises; e.g., the Times Higher Education, or the QS, rankings) can lead to increased surveillance of work performance, in the sense of measurement of performance and ‘productivity’ (e.g., algorithmic evaluations of research outputs), but also, in the literal sense, of increased monitoring via technology (e.g., recording of teaching; monitoring of employees working remotely via tracking software, etc).
3. **Workload Intensification:** The pressure for ‘market-efficiency’ results in the intensification of individual workload, requiring academics to ‘do more with less’ across teaching,

30. Warwick Anti-Casualisation (WAC), (2018), ‘Casualised staff take action against Unitemps’ strikebreaking practices’: <https://warwickanticasualisation.wordpress.com/2018/02/26/casualised-staff-take-action-against-unitemps-strikebreaking-practices/> (accessed 11.1.2026).

31. OECD (2024), pp 6–8; Ivancheva, M. (2020), ‘The casualisation, digitalisation, and outsourcing of academic labour: a wake-up call for trade unions’, FocaaBlog, <http://www.focaaBlog.com/2020/03/20/mariya-ivancheva-the-casualization-digitalization-and-outsourcing-of-academic-labour-a-wake-up-call-for-trade-unions/> (accessed 11.1.2026); Farnham, D. (ed.), *Managing Academic Staff in Changing University Systems: International Trends and Comparisons* (Open University Press 1999) 39–40.

32. OECD (2024), n 20 p 6; Lopes, A., and Indra A. D., (2015), ‘Precarious Pedagogies? The Impact of Casual and Zero-Hour Contracts in Higher Education’, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 7 (Fall): pp. 28–42; Farnham (1999), p 33.

33. OECD (2024), n 20, p 8.

34. Black, N., ‘Trade unions, stigma and legitimacy: A case study about academic wages in British universities’ (2024) 45(1) *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 279–297.

35. OECD (2024), n 20 p 8 (emphasis in original).

research, and administrative tasks (many of these administrative tasks are driven by the demands of the evaluation and ranking systems themselves for data).³⁶

4. National Policy: This market logic finds expression in the functional role of higher education as an instrument of national labour relations policy. Governments increasingly view universities as facilitators of national competitiveness,³⁷ which can lead to collective bargaining being viewed as a constraint on efficiency.

These issues, the impacts of market-based working practices, which are increasingly bound up with the digitalisation of work, and algorithmic management,³⁸ are ones confronting workers and their representatives in many sectors globally, and especially in the public sector. With these key challenges established, Section III maps the industrial relations characteristics of our case study countries, informing the discussion of trade union responses in Section IV.

3. Mapping trade unions in academia

Attempting comparative research in industrial relations (IR) across Europe is always difficult, given the national specificities that apply. However, different ‘typologies or ‘clusters’ of IR models have been developed,³⁹ which try to group national systems according to dimensions such as: union and employer representative density; dual or single channel representation; levels of collective bargaining; collective bargaining coverage; state involvement; and the extent to which collective agreements have legal effect. Looking at models of how IR in universities operate adds an additional layer of complexity, as challenges in international comparative reviews include the general lack of available data on academic careers, and the fact that available data lack depth and comparability across academic systems.⁴⁰ A very noticeable trend pointed to in the OECD study is the move away from employing academics as *civil servants* to giving more freedom to universities themselves to manage how academics are recruited and managed,⁴¹ thus the *university* becomes the employer, and employer-union relations fall outside of the ‘civil service’ model, and become more differentiated (influenced by the national industrial relation model, for sure, but also by how universities are established, funded and regulated).

In choosing our case study countries, therefore, we initially considered geography (i.e., different regions within Europe, where education systems might be expected to share features), and IR models (where there are similarities in the bargaining landscape). In Table 1, we initially mapped our countries against industrial relations features traditionally considered important, based on some of the features of the sector already discussed. So, for each country, we looked at (table abbreviation in brackets):

- Whether or not academics are organised in general education unions (e.g., that might also include schoolteachers) or unions that only represent academics (‘Academic only’);
- Trade union density amongst academics compared with national figures (‘Density’);

36. Sang, K. et al., “‘Being an academic is not a 9–5 job’: long working hours and the “ideal worker” in UK academia’ (2015) 25(3) *Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work* 235–249.

37. See Yusuf, S. and Nabeshima, K. (eds), *How Universities Promote Economic Growth* (World Bank 2007).

38. De Stefano, V., and Taes, S., ‘Algorithmic management and collective bargaining’ (2022) 29(1) *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 21–36.

39. See, for example, Eurofound (2018), *Measuring varieties of industrial relations in Europe: A quantitative analysis*, for a discussion of some existing work.

40. OECD (2024), n 20, p 6.

41. OECD (2024), n 20.

Table I. Selection criteria and mapping of case study countries.

Country	Trade union		Collective bargaining			Industrial action
	Academic only	Density (%) *	Counterpart	Level	CB coverage (%) **	Restriction
CEEC						
SI	Yes	40 (15–20)	State	National	100 (66)	No
HU	Yes	20 (8)	Mixed	National	5–10 (20.4)	No
THE WEST						
UK	Yes	50 (22)	Employer association	Mix	100 (25)	No
IE	Yes	50 (25)	State	Mix	100 (34)	No
THE SOUTH						
PT	Yes	15 (13.9)	Mixed	National	100 (83.3)***	No
ES	No	32 (12.5)	Mixed	Mix	100 (92.1)	No
THE NORTH						
DK	No	75 (67)	State	National	100 (81.6)	No
SE	Yes	74 (65)	Employer's association	Mix	100 (88)	No
CENTRE						
DE	No	25 (18)	State	National (Länder)	83 (49)	Yes
BE	Yes	55 (49.7)	State	Mix	100 (100)	No

*estimation; national figure (in brackets)

**estimation for academic sector; national figure (in brackets) based on OECD 2024, 2025.

***PT: When negotiations are between trade unions and the Government, the outcome is not a collective agreement, but rather legal and administrative instruments that then apply to academics in the public sector. There are some instances of negotiations between trade unions and Universities (aiming at academics with a private employment contract), where the outcome is a collective agreement, in which case the agreement shall, in principle, only apply to the unions' members.

- With whom unions primarily bargain – the State? Individual Universities? Associations of Universities? A mix? ('Counterpart');
- The level at which collective bargaining takes place – local/ sectoral/ national/ mix? ('Level')
- Collective bargaining coverage, compared with national figures (Coverage);
- Any restrictions on taking industrial/strike action ('Restrictions').

A. Data collection

Data collection was conducted via online searches, starting with the European Trade Union Committee for Education database. We identified relevant unions and compiled publicly available data on their characteristics. Missing information (especially for union density, where official figures are difficult to locate) was obtained through direct contact with unions and national experts. All estimates are therefore approximate, based on opinions from unions, employers, and national experts in industrial relations.⁴²

42. This is neither a new problem nor a new approach; Farnham's (1999) study also draws on author estimates, rather than official data.

As we suspected, the picture is varied and complex. We see, in most countries, that academics are (de facto) organised in *academic-only trade unions* (in some, e.g. Slovenia, there are multiple unions; in others, like Ireland, there is one main union). There are some notable exceptions: Denmark, Spain and Germany. In Germany, for example, the *Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft* (GEW) within the DGB (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*) organises all employees in the early/primary/secondary school sector, as well as in higher education. In Denmark, academics tend to join unions that organise in their disciplinary fields; for example, many legal academics are members of DJØF – *Dansk Jurist og økonom forbund* (Danish Trade Union for Jurists and Economics (and Political Science)). Whether or not trade unions represent only academics should be significant in terms of what is prioritised in the bargaining agenda (in particular, the extent to which academic freedom is the subject of negotiation and agreement, and the level of engagement of unions in relation to market-based reforms).

In terms of *union density*, we see that density in the sector is higher than the national figure.⁴³ This is unsurprising, given that public sector density is higher than the private sector in all countries; the relevance for us is that this underlines the fact that *union presence* in the sector is established to a greater extent than is the norm, which should, in theory, aid trade unions in undertaking negotiations and exerting influence.⁴⁴ As we explore in Section IV, density is a crucial variable in determining whether unions can effectively pivot from traditional pay bargaining to addressing complex issues like EDI and digitalisation.

We can group the countries into three categories, based on low, medium, and high density:⁴⁵

Low (<35%): DE, ESP, HU, PT

Medium (35–70%): BE, IE, SI, UK

High (>70%): DK, SE

Perhaps most notable here are the ‘medium’ countries; in three, Ireland, Slovenia and the UK, density amongst academics is quite significantly higher than the national figure. It should also be noted that, while some countries have a single channel model of representation (Sweden, Slovenia), others have a dual channel model, where Works Councils may exist (e.g., Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Spain). In Denmark, all public workplaces must have a Cooperation Committee, comprised of elected representatives of employees and representatives of management.

Given the fact we are focusing on public/State universities, it is unsurprising that *collective bargaining coverage* rates (with the exception of Hungary) are very high (much higher than density figures); in most countries, all academics are covered by collective bargaining of some form,⁴⁶ with limited exceptions (e.g., Germany, where the TV-L (*Tarifvertrag der Länder*), is the joint

43. Empathising, again, that our figures are estimates, for the purposes of establishing broad patterns.

44. Kelly, J., ‘Trade union membership and power in comparative perspective’ (2015) 26(4) *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 526–544.

45. Interestingly, these estimates map almost exactly onto those produced by Farnham’s study in 1999 (for the countries covered in both studies) where he grouped BE, DE, ESP (low density); UK (medium); and IE and SE (high). The study also drew on author estimates, rather than official data, and defined ‘high density’ as more than 60%. Ireland is the only ‘mover’ between the two categorisations, which, while reflecting a slight decline in density in Ireland, is largely explained by the different measurements used.

46. See note re Portugal in Table 1.

collective agreement of many (but not all) Länder for public services). Therefore, it is clear that unions *could* have significant influence in determining the terms and conditions of academics, and on institutional practices; the research will examine to what extent, empirically, this is the case.

More interesting for the research is the ‘bargaining mix’; that is, *the levels at which collective agreements* are concluded. So, in the UK and Ireland, core issues (like pay and working time) are agreed at national level, with local (university level) bargaining taking place on other issues (such as grievance procedures). Similarly, in Sweden, the national collective agreement (*Villkorsavtal-T*) in the state sector covers a number of occupational groups, all belonging to trade unions within the trade union confederation for academics, SACO (Swedish Confederation for Professional Associations). The local collective agreement at the individual university covers the academics there. In Germany, collective agreements are typically agreed at the Länder level. In Spain trade unions bargain legislative and budgetary issues with the national Government and the regional administration, while collective agreements are concluded with the Universities. In Denmark, there is a national sectoral collective agreement for academics employed by the State.⁴⁷ In Hungary, bargaining takes place mainly at the local level. The research, therefore, will consider the role of the ‘local union presence’ at the level of the institution.

This ‘mix’ is reflective of the main *bargaining counterparts* for academic trade unions, which varies considerably and is, perhaps, the most complicated part of the story. This distinction is analytically vital; as discussed later, whether a union bargains with the State or an individual university fundamentally shapes its capacity to influence institutional governance and/or national policy. In the Southern countries the scenario varies. While in Portugal bargaining can take place with the State (the government) or with individual universities acting as the counterpart, in Spain bargaining takes place at national and regional levels, and also with individual universities. Bargaining takes place with the State in Slovenia. This was formerly the case in Hungary also, but there, since 2019, there has been a change of approach, where many universities have been moved towards into a ‘Foundation-Run Model’ (where there is no real bargaining with the State). In Belgium, collective bargaining between trade unions and the State is mandatory. While the agreements reached are not legally binding, they carry political weight, creating a moral obligation for the State to implement them. In Denmark, unions representing academics in the universities collaborate when bargaining with the State (the umbrella organisation is the Danish Confederation of Professional Associations, AC).⁴⁸

At the other end of the spectrum, the bargaining counterpart in Sweden is the employers’ association. The sectoral agreement is negotiated between the social partners, with the Swedish Agency for Government Employers (SAGE), acting for the universities; these set the framework and limits for what can be negotiated at local level with the individual universities.

Similarly, in the UK, the main academic union, the University and College Union (UCU), negotiates with UK-wide employers’ body, the Universities and Colleges Employers’ Association (UCEA), over pay and conditions. However, the outcomes are not binding, in the sense that the UCEA, once negotiations have concluded, simply makes ‘recommendations’ to its

47. The agreement for academics is part of a hierarchy of bargained agreements with the State. So, there is also a ‘Main agreement’ (https://akademikerne.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/stat_hovedaftale.pdf), setting out cross-cutting rights and duties, such as right to information and consultation at unit level, right to bargain and strike/lockout, managerial prerogative and protection against abuse, the shop steward function and protection, and so on; agreements available on <https://www.djoef.dk/> (accessed 11.1.2026)

48. <https://www.akademikerne.dk/in-english/> (accessed 11/1/2026).

university members; whether or not the latter accept the recommendation is often a matter of controversy.⁴⁹ In Ireland, unions negotiate as part of general public sector negotiations; the Public Services Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) negotiates with the State, and its affiliates vote on whether to accept the national Public Service Agreement (PSC), which determines pay.⁵⁰ These collective agreements in Ireland do not create legal obligations. As academics make up a rather small proportion of public servants in Ireland, the vote is usually determined by the bigger public sector unions. At the level of the individual universities, collective agreements are in place, but relate to 'local' issues (e.g., grievance procedures).

In Germany, it is the Länder that are competent in the field of education and run the universities; so while the bargaining counterpart is not the Federal State, it is the individual Länder, not all of which are covered by the joint TV-L (*Tarifvertrag der Länder*).

Finally, we can see from the table that in almost all countries there are no specific restrictions on academics taking industrial action.⁵¹ A big exception, of course, is Germany, which maintains a general ban on the right to strike for civil servants.⁵² Thus, academics employed as civil servants in Germany may not strike, but those with contracts of employment may do so. There is also a question mark over Hungary, where the Government has attempted to impose a 'minimum service' clause in relation to strike action in the public sector (including education); strikes will be considered lawful only if employers and trade unions agree in advance on the minimum level of services to be provided. Should they fail to agree, the Labour Court will have the final decision.⁵³ The issue is controversial, as the ILO has found education is not at 'essential service' in the strict sense of the term, but also that minimum services may be established in the education sector, in full consultation with the social partners, in cases of strikes of long duration.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it appears that strike action, amongst teachers, for example, has been frustrated by the application of the Hungarian law.⁵⁵ The research will examine the extent to which industrial action is a feature of the academic landscape in the countries studied, and what this tells us about union strategies in the sector.

Grouping the countries in this manner (imperfect as it is) and looking at some core features of how IR is organised in universities (even in this truncated form) is a first step. It gives the research some structure, and a platform from which to proceed. The next core element of this research project is to empirically explore (primarily via qualitative interviews) *how trade unions representing academics are responding to the changing nature of work, and changing nature of interest representation, in universities*. In the next section, we prepare the ground for this work, by hypothesising on how the IR features we have identified above might allow unions to respond to the challenges facing academics, discussed in section II.

49. See, for example, Williams, T. 'Can collective pay bargaining survive in the UK?' <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/can-collective-pay-bargaining-survive-uk> (accessed 11.1.2026).

50. The PSC 2024–26 (and former agreements) can be found on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/>; accessed 11.1.2026).

51. This reflects the move away, in most countries, from employing academics as civil servants. For example, the move in Denmark from employing academics as *tjenestemænd*, to the position now of academics having employee status; Gregory, R. and Christensen, J.G. (2004), 'Similar Ends, Differing Means: Contractualism and Civil Service Reform in Denmark and New Zealand', *Governance*, 17, pp 59–82.

52. See EPSU, (2021), *The Right to Strike in the Public Services: Germany* (EPSU/ETUI).

53. See EPSU (2018), *The Right to Strike in the Public Services: Hungary* (EPSU/ETUI).

54. Report No 356, March 2010; Case No 2696 (*Bulgaria*).

55. <https://www.equaltimes.org/in-hungary-the-right-to-strike-has?lang=en> (accessed 1.9.2025).

4. The changing context of academic work: What role for trade unions?

Based on the analysis in Section III, there are favourable conditions for effective trade union representation given that union density is relatively high and collective bargaining coverage is extremely high. However, this disparity between density and coverage poses the perennial challenge of ‘free-riding’, where workers benefit from collective agreements (due to legal extension mechanisms or *erga omnes* application) without joining or participating in the union.⁵⁶ Therefore, **the question of whether, and to what extent, free-riding is a phenomenon in academia is an important one for this research project to address.**

Moreover, high density and coverage do not automatically translate to union influence or effectiveness on bargaining outcomes and the bargaining agenda. Given the key challenges facing academics (precarity, EDI issues, digitalisation, etc.), the core question remains: to what extent are trade unions addressing these challenges?

The issue of precarity is an extremely difficult one, as it brings up for unions the classic insider-outsider dilemma.⁵⁷ As Ivancheva puts it, with the increasing workload demands placed on academics (which also affect the time academics have to participate in trade union activities), and in a situation where line managers (e.g., Heads of Department; principal investigators on research projects) are also trade union members, the interests of ‘casual and permanent faculty are pitted against each other within a single body of union members’.⁵⁸ Outsourcing now directly affects the education process itself,⁵⁹ making the development of solidarity between workers, who work ‘side by side’ but may never even meet, very difficult indeed; ‘collegial solidarity within the academic profession is at a breaking point’.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, unions, of course, can and must appeal to a moral imperative here:

Morality provides a basis for solidarity even when advocating for proposals not in the individual’s self-interest. For example, campaigning for gender inequality might not be in the pragmatic interest of male academics, but everyone supports it because of concern about justice.⁶¹

This links closely with the discussion of academic work (section II) as a rather individualistic occupation. Therefore, an important issue for this research project to explore will be: **how exactly do trade unions representing academics build and maintain solidarity in this context?**

The quotation above directly references the issue of gender inequality (but could equally be applied to other forms of discrimination in the academic workplace). Another core question to

56. The issue of free-riding (certainly not new) has been the subject of much recent debate in terms of ambition to promote collective bargaining contained in the Adequate Minimum Wage Directive (Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union OJL 275/33); see Müller, T. and Schulten, T. (2025), ‘The road to 80% collective bargaining coverage’, (ETUI, <https://www.etui.org/publications/road-80-collective-bargaining-coverage>; accessed 11.1.2026).

57. Oliver, R. J., and Morelock, A. L., ‘Insider and outsider support for unions across advanced industrial democracies: Paradoxes of solidarity’ (2020) 27(2) *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 167–183.

58. Ivancheva (2020), n 9.

59. Swartz, R., Ivancheva, M., Czerniewicz, L., and Morris, N.P. ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Dilemmas Regarding the Purpose of Public Universities in South Africa’ (2019) 77(4) *Higher Education* 567–83.

60. Ivancheva (2020), n 9.

61. Black (2024), n 34 p 293.

be addressed is: **to what extent do unions have the combatting of discrimination as an important issue of the bargaining agenda?** Some information from Ireland, for example, is not encouraging. Although many universities have established EDI plans, structures and objectives:

The absence of trade union involvement in many of these (EDI) structures and discussions is concerning given that many action plans outlined refer to the need to examine current workload allocation models, employment conditions for hourly paid staff, promotions, staff development, part-time working, and other family-friendly policies. These issues are typically negotiated with representative bodies of workers.⁶²

In this context, the digitalisation of work continues apace,⁶³ and we saw in section II some of the specific concerns relevant to the university sector (the potential for facilitating: the ‘replacement of academics’; remote work where there is the possibility to further isolate academics from each other and their representatives; the undermining of industrial action).⁶⁴ In this context, regulations such as the EU’s AI Act,⁶⁵ and the Platform Work Directive (PWD),⁶⁶ give a crucial role to worker representatives in terms of the introduction of ‘high risk’ AI systems (e.g., AI Act, Art 26), and in terms of the introduction and evaluation of automated monitoring systems and automated decision-making systems (e.g., PWD, Art. 13). **Are academic trade union representatives ready for the challenges of digitalisation (in their many guises), and to what extent do they form part of the bargaining agenda?**

Finally, we come to the intertwined issues of academic freedom and the ‘marketisation’ of higher education. We noted in section II that *individual* academic freedom has been given a wide interpretation by the European Commission and UNESCO, which carries within it potentially contradictory possibilities for successful trade union organisation. Emphasising the individual’s rights can, of course, be a barrier to the creation of a collective mindset (and to collective action).⁶⁷ On the other hand, this interpretation sees it as necessary that academics participate in the governance of the university, which implies some sort of representative workplace democracy.

We also noted, though, the *institutional* element of academic freedom (‘institutional autonomy’); the idea that universities should be free to manage their own affairs, free from State interference (what might also be called ‘administrative freedom’).⁶⁸ This includes freedom to manage labour

62. IFUT, (2023) *Report - Precarious Employment in Higher Education* (<https://www.ifut.ie/content/ifut-report-precarious-employment-higher-education-2023>; accessed 11.1.2026), p 38.

63. Özkiziltan, D., and Landini, F., ‘Trustworthy and human-centric? The new governance of workplace AI technologies under the EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act’ (2025) 31(4) *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 503–517.

64. Stokel-Walker, C. (2019), ‘The Netflixisation of Academia: Is This the End for University Lectures?’ *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/dec/04/the-netflixisation-of-academia-is-this-the-end-for-university-lectures>; accessed 11.1.2026).

65. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence.

66. Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on improving working conditions in platform work.

67. Black (2024), n 34.

68. Ekman et al, (2018), n 8, p 307. ‘Measuring’ institutional autonomy is, of course, fraught with difficulties. As an indicative example, however, one recent European Parliament study of the 27 Member States and the UK, indicated that our case study countries could be grouped (dividing the scorecard in thirds) as follows: **Low:** DK, HU, SI, UK; **Medium:** ESP, PT, SE; **High:** BE, DE, IE (Kováts, G., and Rónay, Z. (2023), *How academic freedom is monitored: Overview of methods and procedures* (European Parliament, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2023\)740228](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2023)740228); accessed 11.1.2026).

relations. Amongst our case study countries, of course, Hungary can be used as an example of the dangers of a lack of such institutional autonomy. Academic freedom in Hungary has become a prominent issue, notably in the case of a successful, and high-profile, legal action that the European Commission brought against Hungary, in relation to the Central European University. In *European Commission v Hungary*,⁶⁹ the CJEU ruled that actions by the Hungarian Government had resulted in the limiting of academic freedom as protected by Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. However, it has been noted that the judgment was largely based on trade rules rather than the principles of academic freedom.⁷⁰ Hungary is the most extreme example, but, noting the point made in section II about the instrumental use by national governments of higher education as a tool of competitiveness and economic growth, Maassen et al. also identified legal changes, or at least serious policy discussions, about a growing government role in institutional decision-making in Denmark, Ireland, and Slovenia.⁷¹

Moreover, institutional autonomy (depending on, *inter alia*, the model of governance) can result in *more* control, measurement and surveillance of academics, and *more* outsourcing.⁷² Amongst our case study countries we can observe many different models of university governance. Drawing on literature from Sweden,⁷³ we can identify a spectrum:

- A classic model with roots in the academic sector and older government authorities is the ‘collegial form’ (which emphasises collegiate decision-making, which is academic-led). We can see this model, for example, in Slovenia;
- A model drawing on private companies and non-governmental organisations, is the ‘board of directors’, where many of the members are recruited based on their relationship to external perspectives and competencies, and some are academics and other stakeholders (e.g., student representatives). We can see this model, for example, in the model of ‘Governing Authorities’ in Ireland, or the ‘*Conselho Geral*’ of Portuguese public/State Universities.
- A model that emphasises ‘active leadership’, personified by an action-oriented Vice-Chancellor/President supported by an active management team. The role models here are the CEOs of private corporations. We can see this model in many UK institutions (certainly in England).

The role of trade unions when it comes to university governance is something that is long seen as being contentious.⁷⁴ On the one hand, if academics feel their influence (via University Senates or Academic Councils) is weak because of the model of university governance, this might increase the attraction of union membership and participation. On the other hand, it could be argued that, irrespective of whether academic influence is strong or weak, unions weaken ‘collegiate’ university governance (e.g., by taking a more confrontational/conflictual approach). This must be read in conjunction with the point above about the individualised nature of the work. The key issue for this

69. Case C 66/18 *European Commission v Hungary* ECLI:EU:C:2020:792.

70. Kováts and Rónay, n 67.

71. European Parliament: Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Maassen, P., Martinsen, D., Elken, M., Jungblut, J. et al., (2023) *State of play of academic freedom in the EU Member States – Overview of de facto trends and developments*, (European Parliament; <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/466486>; accessed 11.1.2026), pp 172–175.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Ekman et al, (2018), n 8, p 306.

74. Wickens (2008), n 9.

research project, therefore, is **how do trade unions, given their respective ‘power resources’ (density levels, collective bargaining coverage, etc.), and the governance model in which they operate, address the issue of academic freedom in the context of collective bargaining?** The features of the IR model in higher education (mapped in section III) can provide us with some hypotheses. For example, we might expect ‘academic only’ unions, which negotiate collective agreements only for academics to be more interested in issues surrounding academic freedom. However, where unions bargain as part of an overall public sector negotiation, even though collective bargaining coverage may be high, one would expect less of an emphasis on academic freedom.

We must examine this issue, indeed all of the issues raised in this section, in the context of the increasing application of a ‘market logic’ to universities, as we saw in section II: increased managerialism; the financialisation of the sector; the push for greater entrepreneurial behaviours and ‘market efficiency’ in higher education; and the focus on quantitative targets feeding into university rankings. These are multifaceted and complex phenomena, but here, we can focus on two issues of core trade union concern.

One of the traditional advantages for unions in this sector is the relatively standardised terms of employment, particularly regarding pay. However, a ‘market-based’ higher education model challenges this by introducing wider pay differentials between academics, particularly magnifying the gaps between research ‘stars’, university management (Vice-Chancellors, etc.), and ‘ordinary’ academics. This could also intensify the move to more fragmented pay structures, including performance-based pay (e.g., in Hungary, journal articles published in certain ‘ranked’ journals earn a monetary bonus for staff). It is arguable, also, that the increasingly international nature of academic work (especially in terms of research, where academics are under pressure to publish in ‘international outlets’), may increase incidences of academic mobility (academics moving between institutions, nationally or internationally), creating ‘international research stars’. A highly mobile workforce poses challenges for trade union organisation, which depends to a significant extent on the members’ identification with the union. **How can trade unions respond to this challenge of more differentiated pay structures, and a fragmented academic community, in terms of maintaining solidarity and organisational cohesion?**

Part of the answer may lie, coming to the second issue, in a rather traditional response. We have seen in section III that, apart from the rather exceptional and contested positions in Hungary and Germany,⁷⁵ in all of case study countries, there is no specific restriction on the right of academics to take industrial action. It is notable that there appears to be an increase in the number of high-profile disputes in the higher education sector in recent years. In the United Kingdom, there have been several strikes since 2018, demanding higher wages, better working conditions, and contesting pension cuts, as well as other forms of industrial action, such as ‘marking boycotts.’⁷⁶ In March 2022, Slovenia witnessed its first strike in academia since the country’s independence (in 1991), where the main demand was for higher wages.⁷⁷ In Denmark, following difficult negotiations in the public sector, and warnings of strike action by the unions, municipalities and regions announced a series of planned *lockouts*, including for academic workers.⁷⁸ Therefore, a key question is **whether we will see an increase in industrial/strike action in the academic sector**, as

75. See the European Court of Human Rights decision in *Humpert v Germany* (App No. 59433/18).

76. Bergfeld (2018), n 26; Black (2024), n 34.

77. See <http://www.sindikativ-vss.si/2022/03/stavka-v-visokem-solstvu-9-3-2022.html> (accessed 1.11.2025).

78. <https://www.information.dk/indland/2018/03/lockout-paa-lockout-paa-lockout> (accessed 1.11.2025).

unions and their members grapple with ongoing reforms, challenges to academic freedom, and declining real wages in the context of a cost-of-living crisis?

5. Conclusion: Next steps

The research questions in section IV are derived from the mapping exercise in section III and the challenges facing academic unions identified in section II. These challenges include: threats to academic freedom; the changing nature of the employment relationship; increasingly differentiated terms and conditions of employment for academics (with the rise of precarity and outsourcing; EDI challenges; digitalisation; and the pervasive influence of market logic). While a detailed analysis of every variable is beyond the scope of this exploratory article, this mapping exercise establishes the necessary groundwork for future research. Examining trade union responses to these challenges will offer significant insights into the role of IR and key IR actors in contemporary work environments.

What we demonstrated in section III, using ten case study countries, was the complexity of the models of industrial relations in the university sector across Europe. How unions are able to respond to the challenges we have outlined will depend on various factors we have identified. Importantly, we have seen that there are significant differences in how academics are organised by trade unions ('academic only' unions and otherwise), and we have seen significant difference in union density between the countries. Although collective bargaining coverage is extremely high in the sector in all countries, we have demonstrated both that the levels at which collective bargaining occurs (local, sectoral, or national) and the bargaining counterparty (the State or employers) differ significantly amongst the countries; this is likely to strongly impact the outcomes that can be achieved in collective bargaining agreements.

We have seen that (*de jure*) there are relatively few restrictions on academics taking industrial and strike action across the countries and, indeed, we have noted an increase in some countries of (*de facto*) high-profile disputes. Nonetheless, how unions are perceived, (for example, as defenders of staff, or of the status quo), and which strategies they adopt, particularly how unions balance broader social and moral issues, related to education as *public good*, with member-specific concerns, such as pay, are vital. So, too, is how they address the needs of both tenured academics ('insiders') and more precarious junior faculty ('outsiders'). How unions representing academics build, and maintain, solidarity will tell us much about the nature of union organisation more generally. So, too, will investigating the types of industrial action taken by university unions and their impact on institutional operations and income. For example, strikes in universities are unusual in that they do not usually affect institutional income (e.g., in the UK, students pay fees nonetheless).⁷⁹ Nonetheless, trade unions always need to adjust their strategy depending on the context; a factor for unions to consider in relation to the university sector is the approach they adopt to managing relations with different stakeholders.⁸⁰ This will include, of course, non-members who, as academics, will be highly educated and, often, vocal. However, there are other groups to consider: non-academic staff and, notably in this context, *students*, who are recipients of the 'services' provided by academics, and are increasingly viewed as 'consumers' by the 'market logic' approach to higher education, but who are most definitely collaborative stakeholders in the life of the university.⁸¹

79. See Black (2024), n 34.

80. Wickens (2008), n 9.

81. Bergfeld (2018), n 26, pp 234-235.

Finally, examining the role of unions at various levels (national, sectoral, and local) in defining and operationalising academic freedom will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of industrial relations within the academic sector.⁸²

Addressing these research needs will contribute significantly to our understanding of the challenges and strategies of trade unions in contemporary work environments. Among these, we identify the tension between the inherently individualistic nature of academic work and the collective imperative of trade unionism in a marketised environment as the most pressing avenue for future empirical investigation. Specifically, understanding how ‘insider’ tenured staff utilise their bargaining power (in the context of challenges, *inter alia*, of promoting EDI and responding to digitalisation) to either protect the status quo or extend solidarity to the ‘precariat’ will be a critical test for the future of academic trade unionism.

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82. See Karran, T., Beiter, K., and Appiagyei-Atua, K., ‘Measuring academic freedom in Europe: a criterion referenced approach’ (2017) 1(2) *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 209–239.