

European university associations welcome proposal for Council Recommendation on research careers – further steps needed

Representing a large part of the university sector, and as active participants in the ERA Forum, especially in the context of the European Research Area (ERA) Action 4 on Research Careers, we¹ jointly welcome the [European Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain talents in Europe](#). Here we provide the Commission with comments for further improvement.

We welcome the attention given to research careers and the general objectives of the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on careers and talents, which includes a European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp), an updated Charter for Researchers (annexed to the Council Recommendation), and an observatory on research careers (RelCO). While we recognise that this proposal is moving things forward, we want to emphasise that the adoption of the Council Recommendations will be a first step in a series of more active commitments that Member States would need to embark upon to fulfil the objective of improving research careers in Europe.

1. Sustainable research careers hinge on the presence of enabling framework conditions for institutions and the stability granted by long-term core funding.

First, we call on national governments that by adopting the proposal at the Council they also take on the corresponding responsibility of improving framework conditions for higher education institutions (HEIs) through appropriate legislative changes at national and regional levels, respecting the principle of subsidiarity, and by providing them with adequate funding.

Second, a shift from the declining trend of public core funding is necessary to prevent universities from overly relying on variable competitive funding. Hence, a strong balance between short-term funding (e.g., competitive project grants) versus strategic long-term funding streams (e.g., non-competitive block funding) is needed at regional, national, and European levels. Only in close partnership with governments and funders can universities provide sustainable and attractive research careers.

2. Flexible and multiple career pathways should be envisioned with a holistic and long-term perspective.

The unique character of doctoral education should be widely recognised and valued. The expertise and transversal skills that researchers possess are not always acknowledged and recognised in other sectors, which can lead to misconceptions about the value researchers bring. This is especially prevalent in the social sciences, arts and humanities (SSAH) fields.

Member States should remove obstacles that hinder researchers in transnational and intersectoral mobility in science. These range from difficulties and delays in getting academic qualifications recognised, to the risk of precarious employment conditions, and to the loss of acquired social security rights.

¹ Aurora Universities, Coimbra Group, European University Association, The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, and YERUN - Young European Research Universities.

In the evolving landscape of research careers, it is imperative to cultivate an environment where individuals can pursue research endeavours seamlessly across countries and diverse sectors, underpinned by the development of adaptable structures and frameworks.

Intersectoral mobility should be facilitated and embedded within academic careers, and it should not be presented as the alternative to a career in universities. The promotion of intersectoral mobility cannot come at the expense of a career in academia, as there is a risk that universities become a secondary employer of choice for the best research talents in Europe. Attractive career paths can only be provided if career security comes at an earlier phase in a researcher's career, and if the university's unique environment of academic freedom is less compromised by administrative and regulatory burdens. If universities are no longer able to retain the best talent in academia, this will have a detrimental effect on their ability to create and nurture future talent and to remain competitive in the international research arena. We must ensure that universities are fully supported to be able to offer better working conditions for researchers since private sector organisations are likely to be highly resourced and willing to offer researchers more attractive working conditions than public universities can.

Furthermore, greater efforts to further advance progress on the reforms of research assessment need to accompany the pleas for facilitated intersectoral mobility. Even if researchers want to return to academia, they still face barriers of entry and progression as research assessment in HEIs still fails to suitably reward experiences and skills acquired in sectors outside academia.

3. Universities should be empowered to offer stable and more predictable research careers.

The Recommendation proposes a one third maximum threshold for fixed term contracts at the level of institutions, but it does not provide clarity on which criteria this threshold is based.

The same target threshold is unlikely to fit all university needs, nor does it respect their autonomy. Therefore, there is a need to reposition the narrative from targets on fixed-term contracts to the types of contracts being offered to researchers and the associated eligibility for social benefits.

On the other hand, offering long-term career avenues is paramount, and demands consistent and sustainable core funding for universities. If universities cannot offer stable careers, talent might leave academia permanently. Therefore, tenure track-like systems in Europe should take into account the diversity of structures of national and regional systems, of disciplinary/scientific cultures and institutional configurations, and be accompanied by adequate core funding.

4. The evidence base for monitoring research careers should be developed in an open and sustainable manner.

We fully support the creation of a Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO), as there is a need for a reliable evidence base upon which to monitor and evaluate all features related to sustainable research careers. We believe that for the purposes of developing a sound base of relevant data and indicators at a sufficient level of granularity, a sustainably open and transparent participatory process for collecting the data would be highly beneficial. The ReICO should include data related to the research funding landscape and enable comparisons over time as well as geographical areas and different disciplines. The ReICO

should also ensure synergies with other initiatives like the [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#).

Concluding remarks

Given the voluntary nature of the Council Recommendation, we caution against the risk of further divergence in career pathway and talent retainment strategies between countries already having mechanisms in place versus countries not implementing the recommendations. Striking a balance between encouraging progress and ensuring equitable opportunities for researchers remains a crucial challenge in our pursuit of fostering a European Research Area.

The attractiveness of research careers depends also on the protection of academic core values (e.g. academic freedom, institutional autonomy) and the availability of high-quality research and innovation support offices in universities (enabling the researchers to focus on their research).

The Charter for Researchers, the ResearchComp framework, the human resource strategy for researchers (HRS4R) label and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment are incentives that should remain voluntary and inspirational.

It is important that while Member States are discussing and adopting these Council Recommendations, they reflect on the need for proactive measures and accountability in ensuring appropriate resources and efforts are dedicated to the implementation of these recommendations.

