

July 17, 2023

### **Statement on the ReICO Observatory Concept paper from OECD**

Following the Manifesto for Early Career Researchers that ISE published in September of 2022, and which has been endorsed by 28 European organisations, 33 national organisations and hundreds of individuals, ISE has called for **a plan to radically improve working conditions and career paths for early career researchers**. In January 2023, then Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Ms. Mariya Gabriel recognised that this **was indeed a major issue** for the European Research Area, and declared that it would be a top priority for the Commission.

Among other projects to further those goals, in close agreement with its members representing early career researchers (Eurodoc, MCAA, YAE), ISE asked the European Commission with the Member States to establish a **“Research & Innovation Careers Observatory”** to monitor jobs, working conditions (including contracts), mobility of skilled workforce in research and innovation, including institutional data on (in particular early) research career paths, disaggregated by gender and other characteristics that can lead to discrimination. In our view the Observatory is urgent to allow for evidenced-based decision making, and should be launched as soon as possible.

The Commission’s plan, announced in July 2023, is to establish the Observatory through an agreement with the OECD. The paper circulated by the OECD presents the concept underlying the future **“Research and Innovation Careers Observatory” (ReICO)**. The project had been in the planning by OECD for some time, and could now go forward with the support of the EU, once approved by the EU Council in a few days. **ISE welcomes the fact that the Commission has decided to launch the Observatory: this demonstrates that our request has been heard.**

However, the project, as it is presented, **has serious shortcomings**, and must be improved.

1° ReICO is an OECD project; as such, it will carry an interesting global perspective, and will provide very valuable information on research careers. It can benefit from the OECD Global Science Forum’s expertise on researchers careers (see the report [Reducing the precarity of academic research careers](#)). However, it obeys to goals which are not aligned with the European Research Area’s agenda: no connection to EU frameworks or classifications are indicated. It is also unclear how the specificity of the situation in the EU, as opposed to, for instance the USA can be taken into account.

2° The data that the OECD will be working on are, by statute, those transmitted by individual countries through their statistical offices, which do not meet, as has been observed by several experts, the required level of robustness in terms of numbers. These numbers are incomplete, particularly in terms of the type of contracts (i.e. temporary, and if so, their length, non-temporary, tenured...), whether they give full social (sick leave, maternity leave, paid vacations...) and pension rights or not. It is not clear how the OECD aims to obtain more complete quality data from national statistical organisations or other sources, and what are the terms of the cooperation. It is also unclear how the project will determine what will count as ‘blindspots’ in the data.

3° The ReICO presentation is clearly focussed on science, technology and innovation. It should be made clear that the Observatory will give full consideration to all scientific fields, including the social sciences

and humanities (which are not mentioned at all in the report), and that innovation includes societal innovation. An observatory to be implemented by the Commission should not be taking a very narrow, and possibly biased, perspective on the role of research in society. Research is a public good that women and men who engage in a doctoral programme want to produce, in contrast with the vocabulary used in the document, which considers PhD holders, identified collectively by the word “talent”, as a kind of commodity, which needs to be “nurtured and deployed”. This is not, to say the least, very engaging for those human beings who will be under “observation” by the new structure.

At a later stage of their progression, a significant part of PhD holders will move to non-academic employment. The Observatory must provide a better understanding of this process, not only by giving numbers: is it by choice or necessity, is it related to the precarity of the postdoctoral track...? And this understanding is valuable not just to policy makers.

4° Moreover, the choice of specific indicators is not explained, nor for which goals they are relevant. To give a few examples: why is “AI-augmentation of R&I capabilities” listed, but not others, as “motivation to do research”, “adherence to SDGs”? In the Marketplace category, the demand for PhDs does not distinguish between positions in academia, public administration, international organisations, and NGOs, and in private sector R&D.

5° The ReICO presentation lacks a specific focus regarding early-career researchers despite the fact that they are the most affected by poor working conditions and career perspectives, and that data for those levels are very complex to get. In this, again, the use of or connection with existing EU classifications and frameworks are lacking in the document. Likewise, several known indicators affecting early-career researchers like mental health issues (as studied by the [REMO COST Action Researcher Mental Health Observatory](#)), quality of doctoral training, ownership of research funding schemes (i.e. role of project-based funding), ownership of data or restrictions to academic freedom.

6° Socio-political issues affecting research careers are hardly mentioned, while they are central in understanding the situation: gender-related discriminations, racism, unequal access due to geographical origin and location or socioeconomic background, involuntary mobility, impact of crises (pandemic, war, natural catastrophes), etc. Moreover, how disciplinary differences will be accounted for is not explained.

7° Stakeholders, especially organisations representing early career researchers or the research communities will have a very limited role in defining the goals and relevant indicators; although it might be implicit in Figure 1 of the report, the connection to project-based funding, which is known to be a crucial factor in job precarity, is not mentioned.

8° While a significant amount of work on the characteristics of early career researchers, whether by researchers’ organisations, university associations or research teams like the EU funded projects [RISIS](#) or [SECURE](#) specialising in the study of higher education and research, the report only indicates that it will “showcase and scale-up” promising initiatives, rather than open the possibility of a mutual learning experience.

9° In the partnerships described by the ReICO document, there is an ambiguity about the role of the R&I research community. There is indeed available expertise that can be provided by researchers working on higher education and research policies, and this must be used by the Observatory (see above). However, the research community at large, at all career levels, has a role to play, through its

representative organisations, to set the priorities of the Observatory: what are its goals, methods, indicators, etc.

With these limitations in mind, we call for a substantial revision to clarify the aims, governance, and means of implementation of the planned Observatory. ISE, its members, and, most certainly other stakeholders are available to discuss the necessary improvements.

We recall that our demand to include all relevant data aims to 1° understand to what extent there might be a flight away from PhD tracts and academic careers for PhD holders; 2° allow the implementation of a new conceptual framework and research assessment methodologies that consider the **quality of research and innovation jobs**, and consequently the **quality and the impact of research results**. This requires moving away from the insufficient coupling between “project funding” and “institutional employment” or “contractual schemes”, leading to **temporary and precarity jobs and lack of responsibility, at individual and institutional levels**.

We must ensure that Europe does what it takes to attract some of the best minds to research: the case for action has been extensively elaborated over recent years, for example through a [Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers](#) (2019), the [Conclusions adopted by the Council of the EU](#) on 28 May 2021, [A Manifesto for Early Career Researchers](#) (2022), the [Council Recommendations on a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#) [COM(2023)436] as well as several reports, for example the very [recent position paper by the university association Cesaer on research careers](#). It should include a Pilot project (which we know is under consideration) to be funded by the DG RTD under Horizon Europe:

- furthering the goal of building a “partnership” to foster research careers, be open to include industry;
- considering co-funding mechanisms by government agencies and regional agencies;
- helping the clarification of 3 steps in the employment environments for early career researchers: i) recruitment; ii) career development/progression; and iii) tenure;

leading to a new dedicated programme under the next framework programme.

**ISE calls on the Commission and the EU Member states to work hand in hand with research stakeholders towards those goals.**

This statement was drafted by ISE’s working group on Researchers Careers, including representatives of the Young Academy Europe, Eurodoc, MCAA, ICoRSA, EGU.

**For more information visit the websites at [Initiative for Science in Europe](#)**

Contact details:

Dr. Monica Dietl

Research Director, Executive Coordinator

[monica.dietl@initiative-se.eu](mailto:monica.dietl@initiative-se.eu)