

## ISE Opinion on the Proposal for a European Framework for Research Careers

November 9, 2023

The “Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe” prepared by the European Commission Directorate General Research and Innovation (DG RTD) and released in July this year is a significant development. ISE welcomes the fact that the Commission wants to strengthen researchers’ careers to attract and retain talents and make the overall system stronger and more competitive: it shows that our request in the Manifesto for Early Career Researchers<sup>1</sup> that we published in September of 2022 has been heard. We want to acknowledge and welcome the fact that the different initiatives contained in the **Framework for Researchers (EFRC)**, including the updated Charter for Researchers and ResearchComp, represent a major step for the improvement of research conducted in Europe and consolidation of the European Research Area. In particular, we want to positively highlight: (1) The renewed recommendation to ensure attractive career conditions for researchers including an important (and urgent) shift from fixed-term contracts to permanent or long-term positions; (2) The promotion for a wider use of institutional/basic funding alongside project-based funding; (3) The importance of improving researchers’ career assessment towards a more balanced system between the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of research; (4) The recognition of the need for an improved work-life balance as essential for better productivity and a healthy lifestyle. 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.<sup>2</sup>

However, the project, in its present form, is falling short in the following three main areas:

**(1) The EFRC is lacking effective procedures to ensure successful implementation and auditing of the recommendations for career progression and tenure track models.**

The implementation of mechanisms proposed by the EFRC relies on the cooperation of Member states and Research Performing Institutions. However, the EFRC, in its current form, fails to incentivise these actors to implement these recommendations, which renders it rational for these actors to preserve the status quo (perhaps alongside officially endorsing the EFRC framework, but without *de facto* following its recommendations).<sup>3</sup> To change the *status quo*, it is crucial that:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://initiative-se.eu/manifesto/>

<sup>2</sup> See the ISE Statement on the planned ReICO Observatory here: <https://initiative-se.eu/statement-on-the-planned-reico-observatory/#:~:text=ISE%20welcomes%20the%20fact%20that,shortcomings%2C%20and%20must%20be%20improved.>

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Zey, Mary A. (2001) Rational Choice and Organization Theory. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (pp.12751-12755). DOI:10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/04212-1

- (1) Member States and Research Institutions are effectively incentivised to implement the EFRC. Crucially, the European Commission (EC) has at its disposal the mechanisms required to offer such incentives: The EC represents one of the largest, if not the largest funder in R&I in all European countries; therefore, it has the capacity of influencing Member States and Research Performing Institutions. The example of the Gender Equality Plan, which became a requirement for public institutions should be emulated in the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) as a mandatory practice for Research Performing Institutions seeking to access the funds under Horizon Europe and FP10. Also, HRS4R should be incorporated into the recruitment practices of projects funded by the different funding programmes of the Framework Programme.
- (2) Accountability mechanisms are formulated and extensively deliberated, which would link the level of European Research funding allocated to each Member State with the concrete steps they undertake to genuinely mitigate job insecurity among researchers (for instance, by promoting core co-funding instruments between the European Commission and the Member States that contribute to reduce the ratio between fixed-term and open-ended contracts at a national level).
- (3) Putting in place an independent auditing mechanism to determine if these policies are actually being followed, rather than merely endorsed in principle. Thereby, the EC could also support the Member States and Research Institutions with clear guidelines, including e.g. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely) objectives and best practice examples, on how to implement the EFR most efficiently.

**2. The EFRC lacks concrete methods for addressing the departure of postdoctoral researchers to industry.** This phenomenon, which has recently increased worldwide, is particularly important in those European countries where remuneration of early career researchers is not competitive. The problem is compounded by the departure of researchers to countries outside of the EU, as well as by difficulties in attracting researchers from outside of the EU to Europe: the worldwide competition for talent is fierce! Of course, PhD holders going to industry is generally a positive phenomenon. However, if it leads to the depletion of the pool of excellent researchers in Academia, it poses a significant challenge for the EU academic sector and, if not addressed, it will have serious consequences for the sector by substantially weakening its ability to generate breakthrough innovations.

To address this challenge, The EFRC should set precise and measurable/auditable objectives to member states and research institutions, concerning:

- (1) (see point no. 1) effective incentives and auditing mechanisms for addressing the precarity of researchers' contracts;
- (2) competitive researcher salaries relative to the job market of the relevant European country;
- (3) offering career development programs;
- (4) providing mental health support;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. the ReMO COST Action 'Researcher Mental Health and Well-being Manifesto' <https://zenodo.org/records/5788557> and Kismihók, G., McCashin, D., Mol, S. T., &

- (5) ensuring transparent mentorship guidelines;
- (6) fostering a culture that values work-life balance and diverse career trajectories as a way to make the postdoctoral experience more rewarding and sustainable;
- (7) fostering/facilitating closer collaborations with industry partners to create opportunities for postdocs to engage in industry-relevant research projects without leaving academia entirely;
- (8) reducing administrative burdens;
- (9) improving the balance between teaching and research by providing reduction of teaching loads at key moments, enhancing funding accessibility and promoting interdisciplinary cooperation.

Furthermore, the EFRC should develop a unified and systematic mechanism for efficiently tracking the career trajectories of postdocs to better understand the factors influencing their decisions to leave academia. This should be part of the planned Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO). Those data can inform policy changes and support further initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

(3) **The target of the EFRC should be better defined:** the definition of ‘researcher’ and ‘early-career researcher’, and the descriptors of the (R1-R4) career tiers need revision in several respects. As they stand, these definitions fail to fulfil their function of adequately capturing researchers’ careers and researchers’ career progression.<sup>6</sup>

- (1) as it stands, the definition of ‘researcher’ is, at the same time, too broad and too narrow to serve its intended function:
  - The definition is too broad in that it allows for professionals that have research training but are *not engaged in research* to be included in the target of EFRC. While broadening the target of reform from only researchers employed within academia to researchers more broadly employed has its merits, we want to stress that individuals that are not engaged in research (for instance, PhD holders that work in non-research jobs) should not be the target of EFRC. These professions are governed and safeguarded by other frameworks and initiatives designed specifically for their needs. We need a framework that expressly and uniquely regulates and protects researchers’ careers. To address this issue, more care with terminology is needed. For instance: ‘project management’ should be replaced by management of research, since not all projects are research projects; Furthermore, it should be clarified how some of the tasks identified in

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Cahill, B. (2022). The well-being and mental health of doctoral candidates. *European Journal of Education*, 57(3), 410–423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12519>

<sup>5</sup> See also Kismihók, G. et al. (2019) Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers. Brussels: Marie Curie Alumni Association and European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3082245 See also <https://eurodoc.net/news/2023/high-quality-work-requires-high-quality-employment-conditions>

<sup>6</sup> As we know, any proposal for a ameliorative conceptual analysis – i.e. for redefining a term such that it better serves a particular purpose - is only successful if it fulfils its intended function See e.g. Simion, M. and Kelp, C. (2020) *Conceptual innovation, function first*. *Nous*, 54(4), pp. 985-1002. (doi: [10.1111/nous.12302](https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12302)).

- Recommendation 3 (e.g. ensuring compliance) differ in quality or scope from the same tasks performed by other professionals (e.g. lawyers)).
- The definition is also too narrow in that it departs in a problematic way from the Frascati Manual's definition of the research profession, which is considered as the standard reference<sup>7</sup>: by the Frascati definition, researchers are individuals who are involved in activities that **aim at creating** new knowledge<sup>8</sup>; this, crucially, is compatible with researchers being involved in activities that end up not generating new knowledge. However, on the EFRC definition, being engaged in activities that lead to the actual creation of new knowledge is necessary for being a researcher. This can lead to problematic interpretations: for instance, the definition allows various institutional actors to interpret the EFRC protections as not applying to individuals until they have actually generated new knowledge.
- (2) The current descriptors of R1-R4 career levels for researchers<sup>9</sup> are problematic in that:
- they are formulated in the sense of a linear career progression, which does not reflect the diversity of researchers' careers in Europe.
  - the EFRC recommends that R1 (first stage researcher) and R2 (recognized researcher) profiles should be considered early-career researchers, and R3 (established researcher) and R4 (leading researcher) profiles should be considered senior researchers. There are several problems with this recommendation:
    - (1) It is incompatible with extant definitions of early career researchers employed in the EC's funding mechanisms, which are traditionally spelled out in terms of years post-PhD.
    - (2) It works towards disadvantaging highly achieving researchers, in that if a researcher meets R3 conditions very soon after PhD, they will not be able to benefit from the support that Member States and Research Institutions traditionally offer to early career researchers, for instance: reduced teaching and administrative load, mentoring, redeployment opportunities (at the end of a fix term contract). Since these opportunities are often linked to the early career status, they will be lost upon meeting the conditions for R3. But highly achieving researchers that meet R3 conditions very soon after PhD (e.g., ERC Starting Grantees) are still in great need of these support mechanisms.
    - (3) Conversely, it provides unfair advantages to underperforming very mature (career-wise) and established researchers in permanent employment in universities who do not meet R3, and will be considered early career researchers for the purposes of EFRC.
    - (4) It defines very mature (career-wise) and established researchers in industry as early career just because they do not have research independence. This is highly problematic in that it dilutes the normative implications of the early

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/innovation/frascati-manual-2015-9789264239012-en.htm>

<sup>8</sup> The Frascati manual is very precise that what defines research is the aim, not the outcome: "Researchers are professionals engaged in the conception or creation of new knowledge" (p. 162), "Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge" (p.44), the first core criterion being "to be aimed at new findings" (p.46).

<sup>9</sup> EFRC p. 23.

career status – such as the requirements for support etc associated with this status.

**ISE calls on the Commission and the EU Member states to work hand in hand with research stakeholders towards revising the EFRC to be best adapt it to actual needs and achieve its ambitious goals essential for the future of Europe.**

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