

## Supporting modern and stable research careers in Europe

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CESAER - the strong and united voice of universities of science & technology in Europe - welcomes the increasing efforts at the European level in support of modern and stable research careers, notably for early-career researchers.

[Reform is overdue](#) and supporting modern research careers is a top priority for our association and our Members, as outlined in our publications on [next generation metrics](#), [sharing experiences with Human Resources Strategy for Researchers](#), [Equality Survey 2018 and best practices](#) and [boosting the careers of early-stage researchers](#).

The case for action has been extensively elaborated over recent years, for example through a [Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers](#) (2019), [A Manifesto for Early Career Researchers](#) (2022) and the [conclusions adopted](#) by the Council of the EU on 28 May 2021.

There is much work to do inside the research community, including for researchers and their employers, and we have [endorsed](#) the agreement on reforming research assessment and [support](#) the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA).

While progress is being made, transformation in this area to truly eliminate precarity for (early-career) researchers is only possible by joining forces with EU institutions, national and regional governments, and broader societal players.

Acknowledging the inherently international dimension to research careers, and recalling the treaty obligation laid down in [Article 179](#) of the Treaty of the functioning of the EU to achieve “a European research area in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely”, we emphasise that the EU institutions not only have an interest, but an obligation and a mandate to actively lead efforts and ensure progress in this area, and we offer our full support for this endeavour.

In this position, we call for a partnership between the research community together with EU institutions, national and regional governments and their research-funding organisations to eliminate the precarity of research careers. This partnership should also actively engage broader society including industry. We propose five dimensions elaborated under the subheadings below: (i) unlock stability in researcher careers through sustainable institutional funding; (ii) pursue balanced funding to achieve balance between temporary and non-temporary contracts; (iii) strengthen evidence base: implementing a ‘Research & Innovation Careers Observatory’; (iv) modernise outdated legal and employment frameworks; and (v) foster excellent institutional support of (early-career) researchers through the European Excellence Initiative.

## 1) Unlock stability in researcher careers through sustainable institutional funding

Central to the issue of precarity in research careers is an imbalance in the funding landscape. We recall [our plea](#) to European and national institutions to ensure (i) funding levels in line with top performing countries in the world (e.g. 3% GDP target including a 1.25% public effort target) combined with (ii) a balance between competitive and non-competitive funding streams. These targets are still far from being achieved.

The anaemic funding levels and imbalance in funding streams observed in most of Europe often force researchers and universities to rely too much on short-term and project-based funding streams, such as those provided by the EU framework programme.

Project-based funding streams have a clear value and are vital to a healthy research system and should be designed to support new ideas, directions and collaborations, and can do this very effectively. However project-based funding was not designed nor intended to be used to cover other types of funding gaps. In this sense, project-based funding can exacerbate precarity when deployed in an attempt to cover deficits and gaps caused by failures at national and regional levels to ensure sustainable funding.

To provide the foundation for eliminating precarity in research careers, we urge the EU institutions and national and regional governments to:

- Swiftly enact the 3% GDP target to R&I agreed by the European Council in Barcelona on 15 and 16 March 2002 (“to be achieved by 2010”, but still far from achieved), reiterated by the European Commission in 2020 and by the European Council in Brussels on 23 March 2023;
- Endorse and enact the 1.25% GDP public effort target to be achieved by member states by 2030 in an EU coordinated manner, as [proposed](#) by the European Commission in 2020 in its Communication ‘A new ERA for Research and Innovation’;

## 2) Pursue balanced funding to achieve balance between temporary and non-temporary contracts

We welcome the efforts of the European Commission towards proposing a Council Recommendation on ‘European Framework for Research Careers’. During the drafting of the proposal, a suggestion emerged for the “adoption of a maximum threshold of one-third of fixed-term contracts in the overall researchers’ human resources of a given employer”. We assume this proposed threshold refers to researchers at [R2 level and above](#), as those that are undertaking training (e.g. those doing research as part of their master studies or for their PhD thesis) are on temporary trajectories by design.

We recall that in the conventional researcher career path from (i) recruitment through (ii) career development and progression towards (iii) securing an open-ended position (inside or outside academia), it is vital that universities follow existing good practices which entails that the second stage contains substantial and dedicated elements to support career development and progression and the advancement of competences valuable both inside and outside academia. This is to avoid creating or adding to a cohort of ‘perma-docs’ where postdoctoral researchers are on multiple successive short-term contracts where at the end of

these, limited or no substantial broader career development and progression have taken place. Instead, such short-term contracts could and should contain substantial and dedicated elements to also advance competences and skills boosting career options both inside and outside academia.

We emphasise that a research system should have a balance of both temporary and non-temporary contracts to achieve a healthy flow of talent and ideas combined with longer-term stability. Having a substantial body of non-temporary contracts is important for ensuring the efficiency of research groups and institutions as it facilitates knowledge transfer. It also gives researchers the security needed to be able to question, challenge and change structures that have become a hindrance rather than a help to fostering innovative and sustainable research environments. We underline that this balance cannot be unilaterally achieved by universities as employers of researchers, but crucially depends on (i) sustainable institutional funding levels, (ii) balance between short-term and long-term funding available, and (iii) modern legal and employment frameworks. Imposing a mandatory limit on employers without having achieved these three objectives will not have the intended effect, but instead risks being counterproductive for the precarity of research careers. Such a limit would further restrict institutional autonomy and force employers to reduce longer-term (financial) commitments to mitigate (financial) risks associated with the unstable framework conditions represented by an inability to fulfil these three objectives.

We underline that universities have unique roles and responsibilities in society, as laid down in the [Magna Charta Universitatum](#). As such and as employers, universities also face unique considerations compared to employers in other (e.g. for-profit) sectors. Vitality, to be able to assume societal roles and responsibilities, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential preconditions for universities, as elaborated in the [Lima Declaration](#). Academic tenure and similar highly safeguarded employment conditions (e.g. 'appointment for life') are a means of defending the principle of academic freedom, and must be protected. With this in mind, it is unhealthy for the research community if the only two career options effectively available are (i) temporary short-term contracts (with a typical duration in Europe of two to four years, and only in a few cases longer such as up to six years), or (ii) appointment for life. The solution must include a middle ground (e.g., regular, open-ended contracts) and ensuring a balance between short-term, open-ended and highly safeguarded (tenure) permanent contracts is therefore a key priority. There is definitely a need for such a middle ground perspective from the institutional perspective ('research supplying side'), whereas universities as employers benefit from a more stable working force. In that way it is crucial to foster a discussion towards a shared understanding on what types of contracts should be offered to different types of researchers (or, for what types of research jobs more open-ended contracts are beneficial and needed). While the research community, including researchers and their employers, must be in the driving seat to agree on this balance (which may also be different in different contexts), it should be done in partnership with particularly regional and national governments, industry and private firms and other funders providing the financial means to support this balance.

An important avenue that should receive reinforced attention in addition to ensuring suitable existing career paths inside and outside academia, is the creation of new career paths by (early-career) researchers and innovators. This notably includes fostering new institutions

such as collaborative ventures based on scientific knowledge and technology, including between universities, industry, research and technology organisations and broader societal partners. Drivers in this area include talent engaging in [disruptive innovation](#) and [deep tech](#), and can go across all aspects of research also including social sciences and humanities.

Achieving a balance in funding to provide the foundation for a balance between temporary and non-temporary contracts can only be done through partnership:

- We offer to work closely together with the EU institutions, national and regional governments (and their funders), and industry and broader societal partners to pilot and develop ways forwards ensuring a balance between short-term funding (e.g. competitive project grants) versus strategic long-term funding streams (e.g. non-competitive block funding), to support a balance between temporary and non-temporary contracts for researchers while safeguarding academic freedom and promoting the creation of new career paths both inside and outside academia, such as in collaborative ventures based on scientific knowledge and technology;
- We call on the EU institutions to pursue balanced funding at regional and national levels to achieve balance in temporary contracts as a central component of the EU legal act for a ‘European Framework for Research Careers’;
- We [recall our plea](#) to establish an ‘EIC Young Innovator’ funding programme under the European Innovation Council, as a tool to boost the creation of new career paths by (early-career) researchers and innovators.

### **3) Strengthen evidence base: Implementing a ‘Research & Innovation Careers Observatory’**

A strong evidence base is necessary to effectively develop, deploy, monitor, evaluate and adjust policies. We welcome the efforts from the European Commission towards the development of a ‘Research & Innovation Careers Observatory’ to monitor jobs, working conditions, mobility, and career paths of (early-career) researchers. It should be noted that some common observation procedures and tools (including some deployed by EUROSTAT and OECD and parts of the ‘Frascati’ and ‘Oslo’ manuals) were developed years ago, and implemented through national statistical offices, with limited institutional details at the employment and career level. The type and duration of contracts are insufficiently covered in current observation methods and require new instruments at institutional level, particularly at the level of universities and other organisations employing researchers.

- Taking into account the vital preconditions elaborated under subheadings 1) and 2) above, we call on the European Commission to include as an integral part of the observatory data related to the funding landscape, including the type of information contained in the [EUA Public Funding Observatory](#).
- We call on the European Commission to ensure that the observatory has sufficient granularity over time and at EU, national and regional levels to enable comparisons over time and between geographical areas.
- Even if there is already a wealth of data available, such as data from [OECD](#), the full picture is still lacking. We underline that some institutional data related to researcher careers, e.g. proportion of researchers on temporary contracts versus non-temporary contracts, is a vital consideration (as elaborated above) which is rarely fully and

publicly available, and we offer to work together with the Commission to explore its integration and how to fund needed efforts.

- We offer our expertise and commitment to support the piloting of approaches for example with case studies from prominent universities of S&T throughout Europe to test and improve current observation methods, to ensure the development of an effective 'Research & Innovation Careers Observatory' to monitor jobs, working conditions, mobility, and career paths for researchers in Europe.

#### **4) Modernise outdated legal and employment frameworks**

We have repeatedly made the point that legal and employment conditions for researchers must be modernised in large parts of Europe as these provide the boundary conditions for what is possible, and restrict progress in many areas. Our President Rik Van de Walle in 2020 [summarised](#) it around "incompatible labour laws, migration rules, social security schemes and pension systems". An attempt to tackle part of these issues was through [RESAVER](#), which has only received limited traction. More details around this are provided in the white paper [Boost careers of early-stage researchers](#) where a key recommendation was "the current (national) labour laws for researchers are often rigid. We call upon governments to make them more flexible thereby increasing the institutional autonomy to allow several career tracks, notably enabling universities to establish tenure track positions."

We recall that a revisited approach to employment conditions for researchers in Europe must consider three critical aspects, among others:

- A. Researchers at risk (i.a., due to equality, diversity and inclusion considerations or those originating from countries at war or under autocratic regimes);
- B. Academic freedom, notably for early-career researchers and to make it clear that the development of research careers must strictly follow freedom of thought;
- C. Research careers under collaborative arrangements with industry and other non-academic partners (and careers inside industry and other non-academic employers), (also taking point B into account) to boost academic and non-academic engagements and two-way intersectoral mobility for mutual benefit and enhancing the broader societal contribution of research.

Recalling [Article 179](#) of the Treaty, we call on the EU institutions to:

- Actively identify and dismantle barriers for 'researchers, scientific knowledge and technology [to] circulate freely' at EU level, national levels and beyond;
- Acknowledging the legal obligation of the treaty, pursue a legally binding and mandatory approach;
- Adopt boldest ambitions around the modernisation of outdated legal and employment frameworks during the finalisation of the European Framework for Research Careers, and in follow up actions including particularly ensuring national law is aligned with a European Framework for Research Careers.

## 5) Foster excellent institutional support of (early-career) researchers through the European Excellence Initiative

Recalling the efforts by initiatives such as [COARA](#) and [DORA](#), we underline that the EU institutions can take an active role in boosting institutional initiatives for supporting modern research careers based on an iterative and evolutive process with cycles of learning and refinement where successful approaches are disseminated and scaled-up based on lessons learnt.

Recognising that the pursuit of excellence in institutional support of (early-career) researchers has value along with its actual attainment, which, in practice, is a constant quest in an evolving landscape, there is an opportunity to support trailblazers in this area, and to empower institutions to follow paths laid down by such trailblazers.

Existing tools such as the [Human Resources Strategy for Researchers](#) and the related 'HR Excellence in Research Award' are valuable and should be promoted. However, an extension of project funding could allow for a more holistic approach that takes into account the various levels at which change is made in a university, including bottom-up initiatives led by (early-career) researchers in which their experiences are [placed at the centre of policy change](#).

We welcome the proposal from the European Commission to amend the 2024 Horizon Europe work programme for 'Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area' to launch a pilot action of around €15 million to 'promote excellence in supporting research careers', and we encourage that this is integrated into the 'European Excellence Initiative' which should seek to foster excellent institutional support of (early-career) researchers by supporting:

- institutional trailblazers to experiment, deploy and disseminate best practices and excellence in institutional policy approaches for supporting the careers of (early-career) researchers;
- institutions aspiring to excellence to integrate and implement best practices in institutional policy approaches for supporting the careers of (early-career) researchers, including through promoting the HR Excellence in Research Award.

We offer to support the design, deployment and evaluation of such a pilot to guide the next steps.

If this pilot is successfully evaluated, we recommend that the European Commission develops the European Excellence Initiative towards:

- A. Providing project funding for policy development and implementation for universities with the explicit aim to 'boost excellence in institutional support of (early-career) researchers', based on evaluation and peer review of proposals for (transformational) institutional approaches that support and foster modern research career paths;
- B. Boosting scientific excellence through institutional excellence, thus complementing the European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) which both boost scientific excellence through excellence of individuals and small teams. The European Excellence Initiative would thus not only provide funding for supporting institutional change including (but not exclusively) to networks such as the

European University Alliances, but also complement ERC and MSCA as an additional key instrument for reinforcing scientific leadership and excellence in Europe.

Reiterating that supporting (early-career) researchers has been and remains a top priority for our association, we offer our full support to join forces in a partnership to eliminate precarity of research careers.

For more information and enquiries, please [contact](#) our Secretary General Mattias Björnmalm.

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