

Discussion paper – Informal meeting of research ministers

The European Research Area (ERA) was established 20 years ago. It aims at achieving a unified research area open to the world and based on the internal market, enabling free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge, and technology. The then EU Commissioner for research, Philippe Busquin, introduced the concept of the ERA in order to give a new impetus to cooperation in the field of research. ERA was provided with a Treaty basis in 2009 through Article 179 of the Lisbon Treaty, making the free movement of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology an instrument to achieve the objectives of the Union. The Commission background paper provides a detailed overview of achievements and challenges.

Since its establishment, Member States and Associated Countries, in partnership with the Commission, have been working on the implementation of agreed measures to achieve a fully operational ERA. Five ERA priorities were first set in 2012, with the sixth priority introduced by the ERA Roadmap in 2015. These priorities are: (i) more effective national research systems, (ii) optimal transnational co-operation and competition, (iii) an open labour market for researchers, (iv) gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research, (v) optimal circulation, access to and uptake of scientific knowledge, (vi) international cooperation.

The Council conclusions on the governance of the European Research Area adopted in November 2018 call on the Commission to publish a new ERA Communication by mid-2020. On 17 December 2019, the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC, the advisory body to the Council and the Commission) adopted its Opinion on the Future of the ERA. This Opinion summarises the extensive work done at expert level throughout 2019 and gives options on a possible new narrative for ERA, as well as new ERA priorities post-2020. It envisages an ERA which is inclusive and collaborative; which increases research quality throughout Europe; which is seamless, connected and drives Europe's competitiveness; which is inspiring, open and contributes to the wider European policy objectives. The ERAC Opinion identifies "framework conditions for the production, circulation and use of knowledge, including research career issue" as one of the future ERA priorities.

An open labour market encouraging free and balanced circulation of researchers (i.e. "brain circulation") has been at the core of ERA from an early stage of its implementation. The Presidency believes that it should remain one of the cornerstones of ERA post-2020, which is why we put it high on the agenda.

Free circulation of researchers leads to a better allocation of resources across the European Union, and therefore better quality and higher impact research. Brain circulation, defined as an inflow and outflow of highly skilled people, provides the necessary stimulus to knowledge and innovation exchange, extending to private and public sectors. Promising steps have been made towards fostering brain circulation in Europe, for example the EURAXESS, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, COST actions (which is a role model for open networks), various return programmes put in place

by a number of Member States, and these are important for the knowledge diffusion across the Union and beyond.

Europe has a global advantage regarding framework conditions for research, like social security, pension, funding and autonomy of research. However, stark differences between countries and regions exist. In general, countries with higher R&D intensity tend to have higher inflow than outflows of researchers (brain gain), while countries with a lower R&D intensity tend to have higher outflows than inflows (brain drain). This may lead to a concentration of researchers in certain regions/areas compared to others, which may create asymmetries and a lack of inclusiveness in the ERA.

But in spite of that fact, it should be noted that data is changing, and the pattern is mixed, indicating an abandonment of old perceptions of “East - West” or “North – South”. It is also important to note that brain gain and brain drain are not necessarily a zero-sum game. Researchers who have moved to another country can, for instance, return after a certain amount of time or they can keep in close contact with their counterparts in their home country and transmit knowledge they have gained in the host country. Both can result in a strengthening of the R&D system of the home country.

The Presidency would like to strengthen the evidence-based information flow on brain circulation, emphasizing that brain circulation should not be seen only as a national matter, although important progress still needs to be made at this level, but as an issue that the EU is facing both across Member State borders and towards other global competitors. The Presidency considers that by jointly addressing the topic of brain circulation, the Union can move towards finding solutions that enable a more fair and balanced brain circulation across the EU, as well as attracting and retaining talents to the Union.

However, the Presidency understands that addressing the problems linked with brain circulation takes a long time and that there are no quick solutions. The situation in each country is different, and while some measures may work in one country, they can not necessarily be automatically copied to other. The goal is to ensure that knowledge on this topic is actively shared among policy-makers and used when developing new policies and enhancing the existing ones for brain circulation in ERA post-2020. Mobility and brain circulation should be key elements in the forthcoming discussion on a renewed ERA.

Based on the work we have done so far in cooperation with Member States and the Commission, the Presidency recognises that moving towards better balanced brain circulation needs better incentives, support tools and policy reforms. Although some positive steps forward are already being made, there is a need for more initiatives e.g. to put in place more attractive working environment for researchers, in particular young researchers, across the EU, to strengthen the networks which are being developed at the EU level or to put in place measures to strengthen the ties between mobile researchers and their home countries. Also, we need to recognise the role of different national and EU funds and programmes and the possibilities of synergies between them in stimulating brain circulation, competitive funding, maintainable support, need for transparency,

mobility, inclusion of the less networked researchers, open recruitment, clear procedures – which are just some of the elements needed for creating conditions for a balanced brain circulation at EU and national levels.

Both national and EU action is needed, and the topic should be discussed in a broader context, preferably using a policy mix approach.

The Presidency would, thus, like to invite the Ministers for a debate based on the following questions:

- 1. Focusing on the third priority of ERA – an open labour market for researchers – how do you evaluate progress made in achieving the ERA and what are the priorities to be addressed in the future from your point of view?**
- 2. How to assess and adjust existing national and EU policies and instruments to achieve balanced circulation of researchers and counterbalance potential negative effects of brain drain?**