

ERAC Workshop

LABOUR MARKET FOR RESEARCH, SKILLS, ASSESSMENT AND MONITORING

15 December 2020

(by VTC)

Summary and conclusions

This workshop was jointly organized by the EU Commission and the current trio of presidencies (DE-PT-SI), as an input for collecting views towards the focus of the incoming Portuguese presidency on “Research Careers”. An invitation was also extended to France, as the following presidency and its known priority on European Universities. The Workshop was attended by more than 90 people representing EU MS, AC, ERA-Groups, ERA Stakeholders and, of course, the EU Commission

The workshop (agenda in annex) meant to collect views on three main issues:

1. Labour Market:

Objectives:

- a. Identification of the main challenges and measures to address the mismatch of skills from the different perspectives of academia, businesses and the public sector;
- b. How to make careers attractive to young researchers and promote intersectoral mobility.

The workshop discussions, based on excellent speakers plus a dynamic debate among participants, as in all the sessions of the workshop, clearly showed that:

- i. **Most PhDs aim at an academic career**, but the number of academic positions is limited (e.g., in Belgium, there are ca. 900 new PhDs/year but only 80 new academic positions each year. These numbers are proportionally similar in most countries).
- ii. PhD students pursuing an academic career work, under the guidance of their advisors, with a targeted and strong focus on the development of pure research skills, most often lacking any additional skills. **Not getting an academic job** at the end of their study, or after initial jobs as Post-Docs or equivalent positions, **is felt by most as a huge frustration**;
- iii. **Short-term funding in early-stage careers creates a strong need for flexibility in mobility**;
There is thus a strong need to **open career paths other than purely in academia during the training of PhDs, namely developing skills valued by industry employers**;
- iv. **Dual-paths careers are most desirable but quite difficult to achieve**, as academia and industry have very different goals and rewarding systems;
- v. **Mobility cannot be seen just as geographical**, it must also be seen as intersectoral and interdisciplinary, including virtual mobility as the COVID crisis clearly showed as a viable option. It should also include horizontal mobility to areas other than those clearly closer to the PhD training;
- vi. **Careers in STEM domains are also more prone to mobility** than careers centred on the social sciences and humanities;

- vii. Mobility is now facilitated by the principles of the “*Charter and Code*”, an essential achievement expertly presented by Cecilia Cabello, Chair of the responsible ERA-Group, but several important barriers that need to be overcome still remain. Some participants stressed that the “*Charter and Code*” still has a strong academic bias. Further **significant progress in the “*Charter and Code*” is needed for the new ERA;**
- viii. **Legislation** was mentioned as a possibility for addressing problems in the research careers, but **not the ideal solution**: objectives should preferably be reached through non-binding instruments and incentives;
- ix. Finally, the issue of the **salary gap was also identified as an important barrier for moving from industry to academia**, which Higher education institutions must address.

2. Career Assessment:

Objectives:

- a. To understand if the current model is fit for open science and other current trends;
- b. How can/should the system evolve and change to improve research careers, including improved mobility.

It became clear at the workshop that there currently is a strong mismatch between jobs and skills. KPIs and rewards need to be changed and aligned to bring academic and industrial career paths closer:

- i. The current academia **focus on publications and on capturing research funding is still dominant** and favours clearly STEM profiles;
- ii. Nobody disagrees that **metrics are needed**, but there was a general agreement that **metrics must diversify**, not just use the single metrics currently used by most academic institutions. Teaching skills, collaboration with industry, public engagement, among others, were mentioned as examples of other metrics that should be considered;
- iii. Universities stressed that **Excellence and Quality must be the overriding goal**. “Impact” cannot be legislated. But, as nicely stated by Jan Palmowski, from The Guild, “***we must rise to the challenge of comparing very different profiles***”. We need to recognize success of all kinds.
- iv. Change always poses many barriers. Thus, **Pilots were identified as the desirable way to test possible solutions**, to identify and correct possible unintended consequences.

And this conclusion smoothly connected to the third goal of the workshop:

3. Synergies:

Objectives:

- a. Can we identify synergies between ERA and the EHEA towards improving research careers?

Workshop participants heard from the **European Universities** that they **are quite keen on being the testbeds for such pilots**, including testing interoperability between systems, introducing transferable

skills during the training of their PhD. students, trying to implement new metrics, see how Open Science policies can play a role, etc. Further pilots could address other important issues:

- i. **Life learning is important for industry**, including bidirectionality (training at Universities for industry staff, but also having academics working in industrial environments for a certain period).
- ii. **Businesses look for “skills” and tend to locate where they can find what they need**, creating an incentive for higher education institutions to adapt to industry needs;
- iii. Regrettably, **PhD’s often hide they have a Ph.D. to get an industry job for fear of being considered as overqualified**. This is a huge loss after investing so much in advanced training. **Universities and Industry must try to invert this worrying trend together.**

In conclusion, **there is ample room and openness from all parties for co-creating a new improved framework for careers**. This, however, needs experimentation as we all know the problem, but nobody knows the best solutions. **The new EU Universities initiative, industry representatives and the ERA stakeholders must work together to reach the right outcomes.**

4. Acknowledgments

The incoming Portuguese Presidency wishes to express our special thanks to all the speakers, moderators and participants for their contributions, as well as to our co-organisers the other trio partners, the EU Commission and the Council Secretariat for creating the right conditions for the success of this workshop and provide valuable input for progress on “research careers” during the first semester of 2021 and beyond.

Eduardo Maldonado (PT ERAC Delegate)

Luísa Henriques (PT PERM REP and incoming RWG Chair)

16 December 2020

Annex: Agenda