

Towards a European Framework for Research Careers

Comments from the Coimbra Group

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At its meeting on 11 February 2011 the Coimbra Group's Task Force on Doctoral Studies and Research discussed the draft European Framework for Research Careers.

The Task Force (TF) welcomes the effort to develop a transparent and comprehensible framework for researcher careers in the ERA. The framework could substantially help to promote mobility across sectoral and national boundaries, increase career awareness among researchers and make it easier for researchers to exploit career opportunities. However, it must be underlined that the framework covers "researcher careers" only, i.e. research related careers within the universities and other public and private research organisations, not careers for researchers in general.

The TF agrees with the need to develop a framework flexible enough to accommodate the differences across sectoral and national boundaries. Inevitably, this means that many descriptors will have to be less precise than would have been the case if the framework had been formulated for the purpose of any specific sector or career/employment system. Great care must therefore be taken to avoid the framework being used for purposes (e.g. research assessments, evaluation of applications, etc.) where the broad descriptors can be used in a discretionary manner. The Task Force has therefore with satisfaction taken note of the emphasis in the introductory remarks on the need to develop increased career awareness and a common language by using the Framework as a *voluntary transparency instrument*. But the TF remains concerned that the use of the framework as a tool to appraise individual applications for jobs, etc., could create undesirable imbalances between the many national and European career and employment structures across the ERA.

General remarks

Noting that the PhD degree is a universally accepted criterion of research qualifications, the TF would like to recommend that this is reflected in the classification as an easily distinguishable mark of research achievement and research competence. The TF finds that the clarity and applicability of the framework would increase if the PhD degree, or equivalent research qualification, is introduced as the dividing line between the categories 'New researcher' and 'Recognized researcher'.

The relationship between the framework and other internationally recognised terminologies, however, is rather unclear. This is especially apparent with regard to the relationship between the first two categories 'New researcher' and 'Recognized researcher' on the one hand and on the other hand the second and third cycles of the Bologna Process. We would like to underline that the master level graduates are clearly described as having "*demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor's level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context*", i.e. have undergone 'research training' within the Bologna Process, which makes the term 'early stage researcher' difficult to combine with the first three categories in the framework.

The TF also wishes to underline that the term “researcher” covers a function; it is not a profession. Researchers are found in many and varied professions, including such without research functions, all based on at least four main qualifications: scientific, managerial, strategic and communicative. When restricting the present framework to careers within research institutions only, it does exclude the majority of research-trained people and their contribution to innovation, job creation and growth. It is understandable that an influx of young research-trained people would be highly beneficial to research institutions, and as such young research-trained people should be made aware of the opportunities offered in research, but unless the same institutions are provided with considerably better funding those functions will not materialise. The majority of graduates leaving the European universities will never be able to take up a career in a research institution and are therefore not the target audience of the present framework. This is one of the areas which has been a major concern for the TF in its approach to the proposed framework.

Finally, in some of the descriptors (for example those regarding ‘Star researcher’) it appears unclear whether the competences are indeed competences tested and recognised by peers (PhD degree), documented achievements (research results, patents, publications), abilities (communicator) or experience obtained from certain functions (supervision, research management). Even though it admittedly is difficult to embrace all sectors and research fields, it would be desirable to have more precise definitions especially of the level of independent research results in the descriptors.

Remarks to the individual classifications

In the Coimbra Group’s position paper from 2007 on the role and function of doctoral programmes it was emphasised as a key component in doctoral training that it required significant independent research contributions on behalf of the doctoral candidate with regard to the formulation of the research project, its methodologies and the conduct of the actual research. In and between the first two categories this ability to independently formulate and pursue research should be clarified. The requirements should especially be underlined as a necessary competence for a ‘Recognized researcher’.

The classification ‘star researcher’ does not seem to be precise enough or inclusive enough to qualify as a useful application of the category. It is a matter open to interpretation what constitutes a ‘world leader’. Does it refer to the researcher’s role in a research network, to ground-breaking research or to management functions in international research organisations? The same can be said of the required competence to have a global impact on a research area. Moreover, the naming of the category invites a subjective instead of an objective association of the competences of the researcher.

Concluding remarks

The Task Force on Doctoral Studies and Research of the Coimbra Group appreciates the intentions behind the draft European Framework for Researcher Careers, but would like to encourage the European Commission to consider the negative consequences which could arise from the lack of definitions and clearly outlined categories. The Task Force would recommend a redrafting process towards a more comprehensive document, presenting researcher competences and their contribution to innovation, job creation and growth. This would contribute considerably to highlighting such competences across sectors and job functions undertaken by researchers, i.e. people who have undergone research-training and have proven their research competence, regardless of the professional framework in which such competences are applied. This type of competence-based presentation, aligned also with the definitions in the European Commission’s Qualifications Framework and that of the Bologna Process, could assist in raising awareness of the incomparable human resources available also outside the limited sector of research institutions.