



A Tradition of Innovation

## Researcher Development and Research as a Profession

### Report of the Coimbra Group Joint Meeting of the Research Support Officers and Doctoral Studies Working Groups

Many recent studies and surveys, including the [Coimbra Group Report on the Practices at Coimbra Group Universities in Response to the Covid-19](#), have depicted an adverse impact of Covid-19 restriction measures on researchers, and in particular, on early-career stage researchers. Against this backdrop, a joint virtual meeting of the Coimbra Group Research Support Officers and Doctoral Studies working groups took place on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2020 to reflect on and explore the challenges linked to strengthening research careers and producing a more sustainable researcher pipeline with greater opportunities for diversification and promotion.

In a keynote address, Ms Apostolia Karamali (Academic R&I and Research Organisations, DG Research and Innovation, European Commission) set out the vision and rationale of the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) Label and its future. Since the *European Charter for Researcher and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* was adopted by the European Commission in 2005, 1250 institutions endorsed the Charter and Code (including 30 members of the Coimbra Group), and 568 institutions now hold the *HR Excellence Award* (22 of which are Coimbra Group members). The overall goal of the *Charter and Code* is to foster an open, transparent, sustainable European labour market for researchers. In acknowledging the scope to simplify the process, Ms Karamali outlined the positive impact of improved processes and support for researchers in institutions accredited with the award.

Ms Sinead Beacom (NUI Galway), Ms Pia Le Grand (Abo Akademi) and Ms Sophie Leclère (UC Louvain) emphasised the importance of including researchers in the HRS4R process, together with the support of senior management. They agreed the process involves close cooperation between many units within a university and testified to the benefits of HRS4R accreditation to universities and researchers. These include recognition as a quality employer, increased visibility, increased success in funding applications, greater ability to attract and retain researchers, improved supports for researcher career development and enhanced collaboration between internal units involved in the process. Accredited institutions are regarded as universities where researchers can develop their careers.

Participants explored the challenges to researcher career development at an ecosystem and individual level. Obtaining a PhD does not necessarily translate to a job in academia and the over-arching obstacle is research is not regarded as a profession. Although the challenges are wide-ranging, Dr Marina Ansaldo (NUI Galway) surmised a fundamental limitation that *'many researchers assume they will become academics; they have no real career plan and do not realise there are other options'*. Dr Tina Haussen (DAKO GmbH, Jena and the University of Jena) described how precarious employment conditions as a researcher are analogous to a *'penguin travelling on an iceberg that is slowly melting and hoping to get to land before it melts'* and such uncertainty and insecurity fuelled her decision to move to industry.

Ironically, many researchers perceive leaving academia as a stigmatised *'plan B'*. The Panels and participants discussed the role of researchers, institutions and policy makers in the transition towards a recognition of research as a profession. To facilitate this culture change, it is crucial to:



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- Empower researchers from the outset of their research careers to take ownership of their own professional development by creating a supportive and inclusive environment for development that starts at the PhD stage and continues right through the academic pipeline.
- Ensure researchers learn to understand how to assess their skills and competencies and how to signal their strengths to the labour market.
- Provide training to PIs in how to support the career development of their researchers.
- Build employer, and particularly industry, understanding/appreciation of the broad skills and competencies of researchers, *e.g.*, problem-solving skills, and replace a perception by some employers that researcher skills are too specific.
- Engage in foresight/horizon planning exercises with industry to anticipate labour and skills needs and trends so as to embed industry-relevant competencies in researcher training and career development programmes
- Implement a holistic development programme in PhD programmes and for post-doctoral researchers/early-career stage researchers. This should include the provision of training in leadership skills, management skills, entrepreneurial skills, and skills for lifelong continuing professional development such that researchers are equally prepared for jobs and leadership roles in academia and industry.
- Exchange examples of best practice of enabling and supporting researcher career development across institutions.

In looking to the future, Ms Karamali outlined how the refreshed European Research Area (ERA) will support a seed change around the inaccurate perception that a PhD prepares you for an academic career only. The refreshed ERA commits, among other actions, to deliver a toolbox of measures to support researchers' careers, through a mobility scheme, trainings and more, in order to make Europe a talent magnet. This will include a European Framework for research careers reinforced by a revamped *Charter and Code*, aimed at nourishing talent, brain circulation, inter-sectoral mobility and widening to change how researchers are perceived and improve the overall attractiveness of research profession and careers.

According to Apostolia Karamali, '*brain circulation is a shift from mobility for mobility's sake*' to attracting talent, improving skills and incentivising researchers to pursue careers outside of academia. It is about improving visibility and building awareness of research as a job to ensure that research as a profession is recognised and valued, not just by academia, but also by industry. The vision is to enable a clear, diverse and achievable Plan A career for researchers, which raises an additional question which requires further consideration by all stakeholders. Namely, addressing the prevailing '*gap of interests*' between researchers themselves, supervisors/PIs, universities, employers and policy makers.

*Gunda Huskobla (University of Jena); Bevin McGeever (Trinity College Dublin); Jean-Marie Pincemin (University of Poitiers); Ann Ryan (NUI Galway)*