P9_TA(2023)0482

Young researchers

European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2023 on young researchers (2023/2884(RSP))

(C/2024/4183)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 1 July 2020 on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (COM(2020)0274),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled 'A new ERA for Research and Innovation' (COM(2020)0628),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 18 May 2021 on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation – Europe's strategy for international cooperation in a changing world (COM(2021)0252),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 18 January 2022 on A European Strategy for Universities (COM (2022)0016),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 27 April 2022 entitled 'Attracting skills and talent to the EU' (COM(2022)0657),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 17 January 2023 entitled 'Harnessing talent in Europe's regions' (COM(2023)0032),

— having regard to the Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers ([1]),

— having regard to the Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (COM(2023)0436), which establishes a new European framework for research careers,

— having regard to the Council conclusions of 1 December 2020 on the New European Research Area,

— having regard to the European Research Area Policy Agenda 2022-2024,

— having regard to the Council Conclusions of 28 May 2021 entitled 'Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality',

— having regard to Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/2122 of 26 November 2021 on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe ([2]),

— having regard to the updated UNESCO recommendation of 13 November 2017 on Science and Scientific Researchers,

— having regard its resolution of 12 March 2009 entitled 'Better careers and more mobility: a European partnership for researchers' ([3]),

— having regard to its resolution of 8 July 2021 on a new ERA for research and innovation' ([4]),

— having regard to its resolution of 11 November 2021 on the European Education Area: a shared holistic approach ([5]),

([1]) OJ L 75, 22.3.2005, p. 67.
([2]) OJ L 431, 2.12.2021, p. 1.
([3]) OJ C 87 E, 1.4.2010, p. 116.
([4]) OJ C 99, 1.3.2022, p. 167.
([5]) OJ C 205, 20.5.2022, p. 17.

— having regard to its resolution of 14 June 2023 on Quality Traineeships in the EU ([6]),

— having regard to the question to the Commission on young researchers (O-000052/2023 – B9-0034/2023),

— having regard to Rules 136(5) and 132(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

— having regard to the motion for a resolution of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy,

A. whereas Article 179 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) supports the free circulation of researchers across the EU as part of the strengthening of its scientific and technological basis;

B. whereas Article 181 TFEU obliges the EU and its Member States to coordinate their research and technological development activities to ensure that national policies and EU policy are mutually consistent, with the possibility for the Commission to take any useful initiative that promotes and supports such coordination;

C. whereas Article 182 TFEU establishes a multiannual framework programme for research and innovation, to be complemented by the measures necessary to attain a European Research Area (ERA), including actions to support the training and mobility of researchers;

D. whereas completion of the ERA will enable the free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology, as a long-standing priority for the European Union;

E. whereas the Council conclusions of 28 May 2021 note an increasing trend towards precariousness of employment in academia, particularly in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities, with a consequent loss of talent and reduction in job security, and a particularly negative impact on young researchers; whereas attracting and retaining talent in Europe requires greater interoperability and comparability between research careers, through the development of a European framework for researchers and improved inter-sectoral mobility between business and academia; whereas the European University Alliances could be used to pilot joint recruitment procedures and deliver best practices in training and career development;

F. whereas the Commission communication on a new ERA for Research and Innovation identifies a series of problems holding back the careers of young researchers, including precariousness of employment; whereas a significant imbalance exists between the growing number of PhD graduates and the small number of tenure track positions in public science systems, constituting an obstacle to retaining talent;

G. whereas the Commission communication on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience underlines that researchers are at the forefront of science and innovation, and that they need a specific sets of skills to have successful careers both within and outside academia;

H. whereas the Commission communication entitled 'Harnessing talent in Europe's regions' highlights the talent development trap in EU regions suffering from demographic decline, the stagnating share of the population in tertiary education and the significant departure of young people from such regions;

I. whereas the Commission communication entitled 'Attracting skills and talent to the EU' recognises the importance and the need for the EU to become more attractive for talent from around the world, including young researchers undertaking mobility;

J. whereas the Commission communication on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation – Europe's strategy for international cooperation in a changing world highlights the importance of science diplomacy and underlines that the EU should encourage its researchers and innovators to contribute to and benefit from global innovation ecosystems, and argues that the EU should further promote cooperation in human capital development, especially through researchers' training and mobility schemes, in particular the Marie-Skłodowska Curie Actions;

([6]) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2023)0239.

K. whereas young researchers are generally understood to be holders of a PhD or equivalent qualification in the early years of post-doctoral research, any definition of young researchers should be based on the level of research experience rather than on age; whereas defining young researchers on the basis of their age could breach the principle of non-discrimination and would not reflect the different life trajectories that can lead people towards choosing a research career; whereas it would also fail to account for some of the necessary career breaks that young researchers face such as maternity, paternity or parental leave, military service, non-research work and long periods of illness;

L. whereas the type of funding available often determines the balance between temporary and non-temporary contracts, particularly at national level; whereas if the vast majority of funding that can be accessed by universities is short-term project funding, then primarily only short-term project-based contracts can be extended, as universities will struggle to make long-term financial commitments without long-term funding to back them up;

M. whereas the COVID-19 crisis adversely affected many young researchers who experienced a deterioration in working conditions, funding problems and reduced access to laboratories and other essential facilities; whereas as a result, they had less opportunity to complete their projects, develop their publications and obtain the qualifications required for career advancement;

N. whereas women occupy only 24 % of top positions in the higher education sector in the European Union and are still under-represented among doctoral students in several science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, including information and communication technology (ICT) and engineering; whereas few Member States have included provisions on gender equality in the field of research and innovation and progress in mainstreaming gender into national research programmes has been slow;

O. whereas the EU remains the world leader for the total number of researchers, with a 23,5 % share (compared to 21,1 % in China and 16,2 % in the USA), Europe has not seen a significant increase in the number of permanent academic positions; whereas only a small percentage of PhD graduates will find a permanent post in academia or public research, obliging young researchers to develop transferable skills and obtain the relevant training necessary to have a chance to develop successful careers outside academia;

P. whereas high inflation in the price of goods and services, together with rising rents and mortgage rates, are contributing to a cost of living crisis that heavily impacts young researchers, particularly those on low salaries facing precarious employment conditions; whereas young researchers need to undertake significant amounts of unpaid work to progress in their careers, limiting their opportunities to find additional remuneration;

Q. whereas its resolution of 12 March 2009 entitled 'Better careers and more mobility: a European partnership for researchers' identified many of the key problems that young researchers still face today, indicating limited progress over time;

R. whereas its resolution of 8 July 2021 on a new ERA for research and innovation put forward a series of recommendations to improve career conditions and reinforce participation in EU research and innovation programmes, in particular for young researchers and for women in STEM subjects;

S. whereas its resolution of 11 November 2021 on the European Education Area (EEA) stressed the importance of more research and training opportunities for young researchers across Europe, as well as the mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications that can facilitate career mobility;

T. whereas the research and development spending objective of 3 % of the Union's gross domestic product (GDP) has not yet been reached, primarily owing to a lack of private investment in research and development, leading to sustained underinvestment in science, research and innovation, which undermines the ability of research organisations to provide excellent career prospects;

U. whereas the term young researchers pertains not to the age of the researchers but rather to their career stage, which in the current circumstances means that many of the researchers concerned could no longer be considered as young;

Career conditions and networking opportunities

1. Welcomes the Commission's proposals from July 2023 to make EU research careers more appealing, with greater opportunities for mobility; recalls that improving research careers, particularly for young researchers, is a core priority of the ERA policy agenda 2022-2024, and could help to determine whether the EU maintains its status as a global leader in research and innovation and new technologies;

2. Welcomes the Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation to establish a new European framework for research careers, including a new Charter for Researchers and a European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp) to support inter-sectoral mobility, involving an ERA Talent Platform as well as a Research and Innovation Careers Observatory; underlines that recent research shows that the quality of the data on research careers in Europe is insufficient to develop effective policies; urges the Commission to increase its level of ambition on the collection of data, both in terms of quality and speed;

3. Notes that while the number of researchers in Europe grew significantly over the last decade, the quality of the positions declined; expresses concern that the lack of permanent posts, a tendency towards temporary and precarious contracts, outdated legal and employment frameworks and a lack of institutional career support for early-career researchers can prevent them from planning their future and could prompt many to leave Europe for third countries that offer more attractive and stable conditions for international talent; considers that this type of brain drain poses a major risk for the EU in terms of meeting its objective of remaining a global powerhouse in research and innovation, particularly in some of the most advanced clean energy, deep and digital technologies; recalls that this loss of talent is also a waste of public resources that were invested at all stages of the formation of young researchers;

4. Believes that EU policies countering the brain drain of young researchers should be more comprehensive, not only by recognising the proven value of mobility but also by considering ways to retain and attract talent in the Member States and regions suffering most from the exodus of researchers, while obliging those same Member States to undertake much greater efforts to support the careers of their young researchers;

5. Regrets the fact that EU research funding is used by some Member States to compensate for reductions in national funding owing to broader fiscal constraints, rather than as a means to develop an additional and higher level of excellence in their academic systems;

6. Recognises that many of the same issues and concerns affecting young post-doctoral researchers are also faced by PhD students, including isolation, precarious contracts and financial insecurity, as well as considerable challenges in mobility and career progression; believes that a comprehensive framework to address the problems of young researchers should incorporate measures to support both doctoral and post-doctoral researchers; regrets the fact that too many doctoral researchers are covered by grants that provide limited social security despite the highly qualified nature of their duties; stresses that while mobility is beneficial for academics in their professional development and contributes to the quality of science globally, it can also pose significant challenges for researchers in their private lives;

7. Encourages universities and research institutes in Europe to offer more attractive PhD and post-doctoral positions, and in particular to consider raising salary levels where these are currently too low for researchers to ensure an adequate work-like balance and maintain an acceptable standard of living, particularly in a context of high inflation and rising rents; notes that young researchers in Europe should be able to live decently off their salary to ensure that we are promoting freely chosen research of the highest quality; is deeply concerned about suggestions that some research funding agencies may expect research organisations to dedicate less than a Full-Time Equivalent per full project month in work plans, which could result in doctoral researchers effectively receiving income levels below the minimum wage;

8. Acknowledges the need to strengthen networking between researcher associations and universities across the EU, in order to better promote the common interests of young researchers;

9. Welcomes EU TalentOn and other EU initiatives to promote networking, visibility and cooperation among young researchers; believes that the Commission should consolidate such initiatives and develop dedicated funding lines to support networking objectives within a much broader pool of European researchers, with young researcher participation in such EU initiatives becoming the norm rather than the exception;

10. Supports the improvement of mentoring programmes to guide young researchers on different professional paths as well as to promote research staff mobility within and across sectors; believes that young researchers should have the possibility to engage in high-quality paid traineeships in career-relevant sectors that can broaden and enhance their professional prospects;

11. Calls for a comprehensive effort to identify and dismantle the barriers that are impeding researchers, scientific knowledge and technology from circulating freely within Member States, across Europe and further afield; supports making the full reimbursement of relocation costs a standard practice in Europe; insists that the Member States should make a particular effort towards better cooperation and further alignment of administrative procedures, making it easier for researchers to move around the Union with a family; underlines that Member States should seek to reduce the administrative burdens linked to the recruitment of young researchers and the renewal of their contracts;

12. Finds that academic careers for young researchers in the social sciences and the humanities (SSH) are particularly challenging, owing to lower salaries and more limited research funding in general; believes that action should be taken to ensure that a research career in the SSH area offers a similar set of opportunities to research in STEM subjects; recognises that the European economy has an increasing lack of workers highly trained in STEM, recalls, however, that SSH knowledge is also indispensable for the functioning of a free and open economy and society;

13. Considers that advancing scientific knowledge via rigorous research should remain a valid goal in itself; maintains that young researchers should be free to develop their careers in a way that prioritises basic research and does not necessarily require the immediate development of commercial and technological solutions; recalls that traineeships are frequently a person's first professional experience and can set a career path; insists, as a result, on the importance of research centres providing competitive remuneration in order to attract talented young researchers;

Funding

14. Underlines that the primary responsibility to ensure sufficient and sustainable public funding for science, research and innovation lies with the Member States; notes that any efforts undertaken by the Union, including through the framework programme, are additional to national efforts and cannot fix the challenges created by the imperfect structure of national systems; insists that the Member States should commit to more ambitious levels of research and innovation (R&I) funding, with full implementation of the 3 % GDP investment objective set out in the Council conclusions of 1 December 2020; considers that to fulfil this target, at least 1,25 % GDP of investment should come from public funding; calls for greater public and private commitments to R&I, as well as for improved cooperation and funding mechanisms between the public and private sector, as necessary to retain the EU's global leadership potential and address pressing societal challenges, with the further benefit of offering more promising long-term career prospects for young researchers;

15. Regrets that the success rate of the key Horizon Europe funding schemes, including schemes oriented towards research career development (notably the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships and the European Research Council Starting Grants), remain too low, with a majority of projects graded as excellent going unfunded;

16. Maintains that a high share of excellent and innovative projects going unfunded will weaken Europe's R&I capacity, and may greatly demotivate talented young researchers, many of whom will take their skills elsewhere in the world;

17. Argues that a higher success rate could prove especially beneficial for applicants from EU Member States with weaker research infrastructures and less administrative support capacity, which have tended to struggle most with securing competitive EU funding;

18. Regrets the fact that neither the 2024 EU budget proposal nor the proposed revision of the multiannual financial framework envisages an increase in the Horizon Europe budget, which is necessary to improve the success rate for EU funding and avoid squandering talent as young researchers continue their careers outside of Europe; calls for an increased budget for Horizon Europe, with the objective of allowing each sub-programme to fund at least 50 % of all proposals graded as excellent;

Mobility and portability

19. Supports the principle of mobility between Member States and between sectors as one of the cornerstones of EU research policy and funding, and as a major tool to enhance and sustain the development of young researchers within Europe, leading to better research and improved career prospects;

20. Notes that some of the most prestigious EU funding schemes are oriented towards research career development, including the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the European Research Council Starting Grants; stresses the importance of using EU funding schemes to incentivise researchers to return to Europe after carrying out their doctoral research in a third country, as a way to counter the brain drain that is damaging European research systems;

21. Regrets that the Council has not taken more concrete steps to commit all Member States to removing the obstacles that can make mobility difficult for young researchers; recognises that there have been some voluntary efforts towards greater harmonisation, but finds that outdated and inflexible national rules still make it very challenging to move between academic systems, ranging from difficulties and delays in getting academic qualifications recognised to the risk of precarious employment conditions and loss of social security rights for researchers opting to undertake transnational mobility;

22. Welcomes the ERA4YOU initiative and the proposed ERA Talent Platform as a means to encourage inter-sectoral mobility and improve the prospects of young researchers;

23. Cautions that simply encouraging young researchers to leave academia for other sectors does nothing to make research careers themselves more attractive; considers that improving academic career paths and enhancing inter-sectoral mobility should be seen as twin complementary goals, with the ultimate aim of circulation in all directions, including from business and government back into universities and public research institutes; stresses that supporting young researchers throughout their career path would facilitate their successful retention in the EU research system;

24. Underlines the strong geographical variations in the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers, which EU funding has so far not managed to address in a comprehensive manner; finds that the mobility of researchers within Europe is largely a one-way process (i.e. from south and east to north and west), whereas the EU should be aiming for a more balanced circular movement of researchers between academic systems, permitting talent circulation and helping to counter the brain drain;

25. Highlights the ongoing difficulties in the portability of entitlements between countries, as well as obstacles to portability between different sectors (public or private) within the same Member State; maintains that the improved portability of entitlements would greatly facilitate career mobility and improve retention of young researchers in Europe; encourages the Commission to consider exploring solutions for this issue in the framework of European University Alliances;

26. Supports the Commission's plan to build on the pan-European pension fund for researchers (RESAVER) and develop an overarching researchers' careers framework to further promote cross-border and cross-sector mobility, and that further efforts are necessary to ensure that RESAVER is genuinely useful for researchers;

27. Regrets that the procedures for the standardisation and recognition of university degrees and diplomas between different countries can be overly bureaucratic and applied in an inconsistent manner; regards mutual recognition as a necessary condition for the mobility of young researchers, which should not involve an unreasonable administrative burden or be subject to long delays that can impede mobility and recruitment;

28. Underlines that all these challenges are even greater for researchers coming from third countries to the Union; notes that the Union and its Member States should do more to ensure that the visa and health insurance requirements needed for entry to the Union and other entry requirements are more readily and easily accessible and available to researchers from third countries; highlights that this is absolutely essential in order to attract more talent to Europe;

Gender balance and well-being measures

29. Recognises that greater efforts are necessary to ensure gender equality and gender balance in research careers; calls for the strengthening of diversity in research, notably by ensuring and promoting gender equality, relying on the work of the Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR) tool; stresses that particular efforts are needed to address women's under-representation in the STEM subjects;

30. Finds that women account for only a third of researchers and just over a quarter of high-level academic posts, while making up a disproportionate share of researchers on part-time and precarious contracts in Europe;

31. Calls for a concerted commitment at EU level and in the Member States to ensure that recruitment and selection processes are gender neutral and free from any biases; notes that Horizon Europe is currently experimenting with the possibility of anonymisation for some projects to reduce evaluation biases;

32. Notes that young researchers are often required to carry out a considerable amount of unpaid work to secure their career progression, which limits their opportunities to find alternative sources of remuneration outside academia; considers that the current cost of living crisis poses a further risk to the viability of research careers and could discourage some of the most able young researchers in Europe from continuing down a research path, particularly those from poorer social backgrounds or with caring responsibilities;

33. Criticises the lack of transparency and merit in many closed academic procedures, as well as the proliferation of low-paid, precarious and part-time research contracts; regrets the fact that many public universities remain quite closed to outside applicants; underlines the ambition of EURAXESS to have all open positions in Europe published in one place to foster opportunities for and fair competition between researchers;

34. Expresses concern about the poor work-life balance, stress and mental well-being of many young researchers, particularly those who were forced to struggle with isolation and loss of funding during the COVID-19 pandemic; regrets the fact that the pandemic was particularly difficult for researchers with caring responsibilities, who are still disproportionately made up of women;

35. Calls for the Member States to ensure that they have fair and transparent procedures to deal with different types of harassment and abuse in academic systems, which can particularly affect the careers of early-stage researchers, who remain heavily reliant on references and referrals from senior academics in order to succeed in their academic careers;

Barriers to funding and evaluation processes

36. Encourages the Commission to reflect on ways to ensure that EU funding schemes do not impose unrealistic expectations on or unreasonable barriers to applications from young researchers, particularly those applying from countries with weaker administrative support structures;

37. Supports efforts to streamline and simplify evaluation processes in a way that would reduce stress and overwork for young researchers, and would place a greater focus on the quality of applications rather than their quantity;

38. Welcomes the Seal of Excellence, which allows talented young researchers to have more than one opportunity to obtain EU funding for the same type of project; believes the Seal of Excellence is particularly necessary in the light of the low success rates for individual EU grants under Horizon Europe, as a result of insufficient funds being available to finance the majority of R&I projects that receive an excellent evaluation score;

Next steps

39. Notes that former Commissioner Mariya Gabriel repeatedly declared the need to improve the employment conditions and opportunities for young researchers in Europe; welcomes the commitment of Commissioner Iliana Ivanova, expressed during her hearing in Parliament, to advance the work of her predecessor in this direction, pooling consortia together to help young researchers and supporting fair remuneration and career opportunities;

40. Urges the Commission to give priority to implementing a 'Career Observatory' in the form of an open monitoring and reporting system across Europe about annual progress in framework and employment conditions, including remuneration, social security, type of contract and pension levels; notes that this requires further work, together with pilot projects, to be developed directly with the entities that currently possess such data;

41. Calls for the Council to swiftly adopt and implement the new initiatives proposed by the Commission to empower research careers and to strengthen the ERA, including the proposed Council recommendation for a revised Charter for Researchers and a European Competence Framework for Researchers;

42. Calls on the Commission to consider how the framework programme can contribute to promoting a greater diversity of research careers; urges the Commission in particular to develop scenarios and assess their feasibility in terms of new funding and contractual arrangements for framework programme projects, with a view to fostering the desired change in the recruitment and retention practices of beneficiaries of the programme; believes that such scenarios could also assess the feasibility of a European guarantee offered to public research organisations which recruit research staff for the implementation of a Horizon Europe project on a contract that is significantly longer than the running time of the project; believes that, where possible, the Commission should look at ways to encourage new forms of institutional funding mechanisms under Horizon Europe;

43. Insists on the need for more concerted effort by the EU and its Member States to address the long-standing underlying problems faced by young researchers in Europe, as this will ultimately help the EU meet its objective of remaining a global leader in R&I and at the forefront of developing new technologies in the most critical fields; urges the Commission to guide these processes in such a way as to effectively improve access to high-quality research careers across the entire ERA, thereby ensuring multi-directional and balanced brain circulation; believes that it is crucial to mobilise all stakeholders to reach these goals, including national authorities and funding agencies, private foundations and the general private sector, with the cooperation of Parliament;

44. Calls on the Commission to fully and proactively involve organisations representing the interests of young researchers in the development of policies aimed at improving the situation of young researchers;

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45. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Commission, the Council and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.