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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Talents, skills, research careers – how to move forward

European Research and Innovation Area Committee (ERAC) delegations will find attached a Background Note on the discussion “Talents, skills, research careers – how to move forward,” prepared by the Commission, with a view to the ERAC meeting on 13-14 February 2025.

Talents, skills, research careers – how to move forward

Strategic debate on designing a ‘fifth freedom’ for enhancing Europe’s R&I capabilities, culture and competitiveness

Context

Human capital plays an integral role in fortifying the European Research Area (ERA) and enhancing the overall competitiveness of the EU’s research and innovation (R&I) ecosystems. However, the current EU R&I landscape faces skills shortages, and a substantial number of top-tier researchers are being drawn to opportunities in countries where resources, working and employment conditions and career prospects may be more favourable, leading to imbalances that not only hamper Europe’s capabilities for competing globally, but also exacerbate existing disparities in R&I performance across the continent.

Countering this trend requires coherent and strategic policy coordination as recognised in the Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, which was adopted in December 2023¹. The Recommendation calls for framework conditions to retain talented researchers in the EU and stresses the importance of supporting attractive research careers and strengthening the research management capacity.

The recently published strategic reports by Letta², Draghi³ and Heitor⁴ call for a strategic overhaul of the EU’s approach to the topic of research and innovation in the strengthening of European competitiveness, and emphasise the importance of mobility, talent attraction and retention, skill mapping and recognition, job quality improvement and open access to knowledge, as critical components for nurturing research careers and talents within the EU. The recent Council Conclusions on ‘Strengthening the competitiveness of the EU, reinforcing the European Research Area (ERA) and overcoming its fragmentation’⁵ also reaffirm the need for further action. The Conclusions acknowledge that talent is a key asset for driving economic growth, technological development and societal progress, and that research careers play a key role in maintaining Europe as a globally attractive location to do cutting-edge and excellent research and innovation. Strengthening a positive research culture across Europe is also crucial in this context, as it can foster collaboration, innovation, and sustainable career development for researchers.

¹ OJ C, C/2023/1640, 29.12.2023 - [Council reaches political agreement on how to keep, attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe - Consilium](#)

² [Enrico Letta - Much more than a market \(April 2024\)](#)

³ [EU competitiveness: Looking ahead - European Commission](#)

⁴ [Align, act, accelerate - Publications Office of the EU](#)

⁵ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16179-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

Current commitments and ongoing actions

A package of policies and tools aimed at enhancing research careers and attracting and retaining talent within the ERA has been launched in the context of the ERA Policy Agenda. The adoption of the mentioned Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, which includes a new European Charter for Researchers, was a major achievement. It aims at creating a common understanding of research careers and assessment among Member States, supports researchers' skills, attractive working conditions and mobility experiences, and recognises diverse contributions to research. The implementation of this new framework at national level is supported by a Mutual Learning Exercise (MLE), supported by the Horizon Europe Policy Support Facility⁶. Other initiatives include the Horizon Europe pilot call on Talent Ecosystems, the establishment of the Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO) in collaboration with the OECD, the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp), the RESAVER pension fund to foster researchers' mobility and facilitate cross-border activities of R&I organisations, the revamp of EURAXESS, and the launch of the ERA Talent Platform as a single information gateway for researchers and research organisations in Europe. Additionally, the HR Excellence in Research award continues to play a key role towards better working conditions for researchers based on the new European Charter for Researchers, and various Horizon Europe programme parts involve researchers in upskilling activities (including the European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions).

Cultivating a strong and cohesive research culture is essential for promoting collaboration. Steps have been taken to increase European unity in research culture (which in turn can benefit the attractiveness of the European R&I landscape). The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) is a collective of organisations committed to reforming the methods and processes by which research, researchers, and research organisations are evaluated.

Systemic gaps in current policy

Several pending or systemic gaps persist, for example around working and employment conditions, talent management strategies, job security and career progression, requirements for third country researchers, mutual recognition of qualifications, limited portability of grants, skills mismatching, social security gaps, hurdles for geographical and intersectoral mobility, or threats to freedom of scientific research and intellectual autonomy. Furthermore, differences in research and skills assessment can hinder inter-European mobility, potentially forcing skilled researchers to seek employment outside of the EU R&I landscape. The specific challenges researchers face can vary according to the country where researchers are based and the career stage they are in. In general, several signals point to difficulties experienced mainly by early career researchers, such as postdocs.

⁶ [The Commission package for attractive and sustainable research careers advances steadily - European Commission](#)

Strategic discussion points

ERAC delegations are invited to focus on how addressing prominent challenges for research careers could contribute to the achievement of a well-functioning ERA, a properly integrated R&I Union and of a ‘fifth freedom’ that strengthens Europe’s R&I capabilities, culture and competitiveness within the new global landscape. The goal of the strategic discussion is to determine which policy directions should be developed further, with the intention to ultimately work towards strategic policy coordination (as called for by the aforementioned Letta, Draghi and Heitor reports and Council Recommendation).

Against this backdrop, the following questions are proposed for reflection and one-time interventions:

1. What are the most pressing challenges affecting research careers and hindering researchers’ mobility? Issues to consider may be challenges with regards to attracting and retaining talent within Europe, intersectoral and inter-European mobility, career progression and issues pertaining to specific research career phases.
2. What are, in your perspective, EU-level solutions to tackle these pressing challenges? Please include in your reflection any relevant examples or initiatives in your country that have proven effective in enhancing working and employment conditions and which may be relevant for expansion or adaption at the EU level. This may include the (legislative) policies that create attractive working and employment conditions, competitive remuneration packages and robust career pathways for researchers (especially in the post-doc phase), creating shared criteria for recognition and reward of talent or targeted initiatives aimed at reskilling and upskilling the workforce or EU.
3. How can we, as ERAC, further push this debate and realise change? How, for example, could already existing policies and tools be further supported with enhanced policy coordination with a view to developing a framework compatible with a ‘fifth freedom’?