

Working Together to Strengthen Research in Europe
European Research Area Conference 21-23 October 2009, Brussels

Session 1.1: Research careers: how to improve social security coverage and working conditions in a borderless research area

Conclusions

The session covered five interrelated topics concerning the research profession: 1) Information 2) social security coordination 3) Supplementary pension rights 4 Flexicurity and 5) Training and Skills. Below a summary of ideas, conclusions and recommendations.

1. Information

The issue and context

An impressive array of information systems has been build up in recent years to support the mobile worker in general (EURES) and the mobile researcher in particular (EURAXESS). 200 EURAXESS mobility centres provide a range of information services to mobile researchers.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension

Despite the overwhelming offer of general information at European and national level, the individual mobile research worker often lacks detailed information, tailored to his or her specific situation. This constitutes a serious obstacle to researchers' mobility in Europe.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. National Social security administrations should commit themselves to effectively provide client tailored information to individual mobile researchers.
2. This tailor made information should be made accessible via an interactive EURAXESS rights platform, for which the Commission should make provisions.

2. Social security coordination

The issue and context

Member States are free to work out their social protection systems as there is no specific European social security system. Conditions for insurance and entitlement to benefits solely depend on the very divergent systems of the Member States. These conditions can, however, have an adverse effect on the mobility of workers. Therefore the European legislator set up a co-ordination system. The primary objective of this co-ordination is to rectify the aspects of national social legislation that may have adverse effects for employed or self-employed persons when they cross national frontiers. This system has been laid down in EC Regulations 1408/71 and 574/72 but will be replaced by Regulation 883/2004 as of 1 May 2010.

In order to fine tune the implementation of the regulations, it will be necessary to analyse how researchers' career paths relate to the "new forms of mobility" currently under examination for all workers. Such an analysis will also have to explore to what extent it may be feasible to cover specific needs of researchers through implementation guidance, administrative procedures and, if none of these are sufficient, new legislative initiatives which would complement the new regulation. This could happen on the basis of the specific characteristics of mobility (e.g. the succession of several short contracts in several Member States). Main actors here are the Member States, the Commission, Council, Parliament and stakeholders.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension

Existing EU regulations do not cover as efficiently newer forms of mobility of workers who frequently work on short-term contracts in different Member States. Since researchers are among the most mobile categories of workers and can often hold a series of short term contracts during their careers, they are particularly likely to be confronted with difficulties. The transnational nature of this problem calls for a solution at European level.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. There was consensus that researchers who work as employees should join forces with other categories of highly mobile workers such as journalists, artists and engineers rather than claiming to be treated as a "special" category of workers.
2. The key principles of the EU legal framework on social security co-ordination should become better known. Ways should be explored to overcome the disadvantages caused by a strict application of current rules, in particular the lex loci laboris (i.e. regime of the workplace) for highly mobile workers, including researchers.
3. Social security bodies are recommended to make more and better use of the possibility of exceptions foreseen by EU Regulations ("article 17 derogations"), which allow Member States by common agreement to choose the most appropriate national regime for the mobile worker.
4. Some institutions and funders provide research grants to young researchers with little or no social security coverage. On the one hand, this allows institutions to engage larger numbers of young people in research activities. On the other hand, this practice makes the research career less attractive compared to other types of employment and could be considered as 'social dumping'.
5. A stakeholders' forum could help to raise the awareness and foster debate on social security coordination and other issues relevant for the research profession.

3. Supplementary pensions

The issue and context

While the accumulation of rights of the public pension system via the social security coordination mechanism (1408/71 and its successor) is addressed, there are still many issues outstanding for supplementary pensions which are not easily transferable from one country to another. This problem concerns Member States, researchers, funders, employers and pension

providers.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension

Workers increasingly rely on supplementary pension schemes in order to provide for their retirement. However, the conditions for acquisition, preservation and transfer of supplementary pension rights are often not well suited for mobile workers such as researchers. The transnational nature of this problem calls for a solution worked out by Member States, pension providers, funders and employers, cooperating at European level.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. Member States and the Commission, working in partnership with other stakeholders, should explore the feasibility to ease transfer of supplementary pension rights for mobile workers, including researchers.
2. Member States, the Commission and stakeholders should actively promote the establishment of one or more pan-European pension funds for mobile researchers, building on the outcomes of the feasibility study conducted on behalf of the Commission in 2009-2010.

4. Flexicurity

The issue and context

The policy approach throughout the EU for making the labour market more flexible, while providing security to workers, is embedded in the EU wide agreed flexicurity principles. The core of the concept is in facilitating transition on the labour market. Flexicurity is of particular relevance for researchers, who suffer from too many short-time contracts on the one hand (young researchers) and too much mobility-frustrating rigidity on the other hand (senior researchers). The flexibility approach is also promoted to weather the economic crisis and to lay the foundation for the new economic upswing. This issue concerns researchers, Member States, funders and employers.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension

The economic crisis is forcing companies to cut back on their human resources including researchers. The question should therefore be raised on the maintenance of research relevant human capital. Some countries have initiated specific measures to avoid human capital destruction which could provide a good basis for mutual learning organised at European level.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. Member States are encouraged to take measures to ensure that laid off researchers are kept in research positions in line with agreed flexicurity principles. The Commission could organise mutual learning activities on crisis measures taken by Member States.
2. Commission and Member States are encouraged to increase the scope for action and visibility of researchers and other knowledge workers in the follow-up to the Lisbon Strategy and its Integrated Guidelines. Particular consideration should be given to the career development of women researchers.

3. Employers could be asked to work 'in tandem' to ensure smooth transitions between different contracts in the spirit of 'flexicurity'.

5. Training and Skills

The issue and context

Researchers need to be fully equipped with the skills necessary to participate in a range of roles in the modern knowledge economy. Next to subject specific knowledge, they need generic competences like communication, problem solving and leadership, allowing them to easily transfer between institutions, countries and sectors. The European Partnership for Researchers calls on Member States to develop "National Skills Agenda's". These Skills Agenda's should fit the Bologna Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). Successful skills agenda's involve all stakeholders, notably universities and employers.

In addition to the skills development of researchers themselves, there is also a need to consider the impact of research and innovation on skills' development for the working population as whole, as outlined in the "New Skills for New Jobs" initiative.

Analysis of the challenges and European dimension

Researchers' competences, particularly the generic competences, are not well known and appreciated inside and outside academia. Europe could make a much better use of this high level segment of its work force by promoting a common understanding of their competences across countries and sectors. A common understanding on researchers' competences, at various career stages, could help to facilitate geographical and intersectoral mobility and enhance the overall appreciation for the research profession. An agreed set of competences could serve researchers' career development and help to better organise research training both at initial level (e.g. research schools) as well as in continuing professional development.

Another challenge will be to anticipate and define the future needs, in terms of skills and competences, of the broader workforce, resulting from research and innovation, with a view to better match labour demand and supply.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. Member States, Commission and stakeholders should work in partnership to reach a common understanding on a set of researchers' competences at various career stages, building on the work carried out by the ERA Steering Group Human Resources and Mobility and other stakeholders forums.
2. Experts and stakeholders should analyse and define the skills and competences needed by the future workforce to be well equipped to address the changes resulting from research and innovation.
3. The suggestion was made to explore the possibility of creating a new funding instrument to support a substantial number of European PhD's allocated to a number of European Research Schools. These schools would need to fulfil a number of criteria such as:

- Compliance with the European Charter and Code
- Full costing transparency
- Being active in the three legs of the knowledge triangle (following the EIT approach)
- Being involved in joint degrees with partners abroad (as seen under Marie Curie, Erasmus Mundus and the KIC's)