

Green Paper

From Challenges to Opportunities: Towards a Common Strategic Framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding

Response by the Irish Research Staff Association

Strengthening the European Research Area - Working conditions of contract researchers: the Irish example

The Green Paper recognizes that ‘world class excellence can only thrive in a system in which all researchers across the EU are provided with the means to develop into excellence and eventually compete for the top spots.’ Unfortunately the current situation on the ground falls a long way short of these laudable aspirations. The rapid expansion of fourth-level research in Ireland over the last decade has led to an extraordinary upsurge in contract research posts funded by external agencies, forming a distinctive sector within the research community. Such researchers normally operate on short-term contracts or contracts of indefinite duration dependent on external funding and lack most of the benefits of other academic staff. Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and funding bodies have been slow to integrate research staff into their career and pay structures; most researchers are not included on pay scales, have minimal opportunity to accumulate pension benefits and secure only basic statutory redundancy on expiry of their employment. Such researchers cannot hold grants in their own name or apply for research funding independently. No viable career path currently exists for externally funded researchers within third-level institutions in Ireland, while career development which might provide greater employability in the private sector is also extremely limited. The implementation of the Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act, 2003, provided security against the issuing of multiple short-term contracts, but has not guaranteed either attractive working conditions or any degree of stability in employment for contract researchers. Most contract researchers work in employment conditions that would not be considered appropriate in any other academic or professional environment – lacking security, independence and sometimes the freedom to pursue their own research.

Most contract researchers working in higher education institutions (HEIs) accept a considerable degree of uncertainty due to the nature of externally funded posts. But widespread insecurity, short-term contract extensions and restricted career options have become endemic for this cohort of academic staff. This situation has created major challenges not only for individual staff and principal investigators but institutions and the higher education sector as

a whole. For example, it is not unusual for contract researchers to be caught in limbo, waiting for the conclusion of a grant application process when their contract has expired: this is a loophole that leads to postdoctoral researchers leaving employment to go elsewhere (usually outside their research area or original profession) even before a decision is made on the application. A significant proportion of postdoctoral research staff abandon research completely, not through choice but because there are no viable opportunities open to them or because they are unable to plan adequately for their future. The current level of instability is deeply damaging to the objectives of supporting world class excellence within a European Research Area and developing attractive researcher careers.

Q. 22. How should EU support assist Member States in building up excellence?

The development of formal mechanisms to recognize the existing contribution of research staff is vital to facilitate the development of attractive careers (in academia and/or industry) and promote better mobility. The Commission recognized the importance of attractive researcher careers in its communication, *Better Careers and More Mobility: A European Partnership for Researchers* (May 2008). Further engagement by the Commission would be valuable in giving guidance to Member States for the development of fair and transparent processes recognizing the achievement of contract researchers. Appropriate recognition for work-based achievements is a minimum standard if HEIs expect to attract and retain high-quality researchers. Publication is a key measure of achievement, where the contribution of researchers is acknowledged formally – but it is by no means the sole contribution made by postdoctoral research staff. The work of researchers with regard to grant writing, project management, administration and postgraduate supervision is crucial to the continued functioning of many universities. Yet recognition remains an ad hoc affair, dependent on the goodwill of an individual PI or department. This unstructured and haphazard pattern does not serve the interests of the institution, the policy requirements of the Irish state or the objective of developing a flourishing European Research Area. The following mechanisms are proposed to recognise the contribution of contract research staff:

- All HEIs and funding authorities should allow contract researchers who have taken the lead role in writing a grant application or project proposal to be named as principal investigator;
- Where junior researchers have contributed to a grant within a multi-disciplinary team under the direction of a senior academic, such researchers should have a right to be acknowledged as ‘significant contributor’ on the grant application. This proposal was made by the

Irish Higher Education Research Group in 2009, but has not yet been implemented.

- Participation by contract research staff in postgraduate supervision, project administration and teaching should be recognized on a systematic basis.

Q. 23. How should the role of Marie Curie Actions be strengthened in promoting researcher mobility and developing attractive careers?

The Marie Curie Actions represent an important advance in promoting researcher mobility within a viable career framework. Good practice in career development for researchers exemplified by the Marie Curie initiative should be adopted more widely as part of the common strategic framework for research and innovation. Yet the ability of Marie Curie Actions to develop international mobility is sometimes limited due to practical problems at institutional or national level, such as restrictions on researchers applying for the Marie Curie Reintegration grants if they are employed on an existing research contract. The continuation and expansion of Marie Curie Actions would be warmly welcomed by researchers, but should be combined with wider efforts to facilitate mobility, especially with regard to pan-European pension and social security entitlements.

Q. 27. Which key issues and obstacles concerning the ERA should EU funding instruments seek to overcome, and which should be addressed by other (e.g. legislative) measures?

Institutional or sectoral barriers to funding proposals by high-quality researchers (for example, a requirement to have a senior academic as principal investigator; requirements for a long-term contract to make a grant application; limitations on who may apply for a particular grant) represent a significant restriction on the research potential of higher education institutions. Moreover, it is important to encourage postdoctoral researchers to secure independent funding and avoid perpetuating a subordinate 'master-apprentice' PI-junior researcher relationship indefinitely. As a general policy, it is important to remove restrictions on independent applications for funding by contract research staff.

- It is important to overcome formal and practical restrictions at national level on independent applications for funding by contract researchers and contract lecturers e.g. related to length of contract, status within an institution. Specifically, contract staff should be enabled to apply for grants at European and national level as principal investigator, while including a member of permanent staff as a mentor.

- Currently the approach adopted by certain funding authorities in preventing a contract researcher from applying for their own salary as part of a grant is a key obstacle to successful grant applications.

Such initiatives could be progressed by the European Commission in conjunction with Member States and HEIs; they would not necessarily require legislation, but would certainly benefit from high level engagement and attention from the relevant Units within the Commission.

Several incremental funding measures at European level would have great potential in ameliorating the limited career development and restricted opportunities available to researchers:

- The establishment of an official European-wide mechanism (perhaps under the auspices of the ERC) to provide bridging funding to high-quality research staff to enable them to stay in employment temporarily, while working to secure alternative sources of funding and/or to await the outcome of funding applications. Such a mechanism is essential if highly qualified and productive research staff are to be given a real opportunity to stay in research while applying for new grants.
- Funding authorities and institutions should achieve greater flexibility by allowing postdoctoral researchers to apply for/work on more than one grant. At the very least, research contracts should ensure that high-quality contract researchers are facilitated in freeing up time to apply for new grants while continuing to work on their existing project.

A key issue here is that a new generation of researchers should be able to compete openly and independently for research funding, whether they ultimately stay in academia or not. Such fair competition is very much in the interests of the EU and the higher education sector as a whole, though it may not find favour with individuals. The integration of a significant segment of new contract researchers within the academic community at university level would significantly enhance research output on a long-term basis. The sustained engagement of the European Commission in developing attractive researcher careers and opening up competition for funding will pay rich dividends in promoting excellence in research and enhancing Europe's global competitiveness.

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