Recognition and Support of Diverse Research Careers

Examples of best practices

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Personal authors: Ioana Spanache

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Short study to identify best practices on recognition and support of diverse research careers

Result of a pilot activity implemented as part of the SECURE project

UEFISCDI – Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding

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Content

1. Introduction

Purpose of the document

The document presents a short and concise set of best practice examples related to recognition and support of diverse research careers.

Through this, we aim to provide academics, researchers, policy-makers in the research area, funders, and other key stakeholders with a brief overview of recent developments related to recognition and support of diverse research careers. The document briefly presents 3 examples of support programmes, developed at both EU and national levels, that aim to assist researchers in their career paths.

Recognition and support of diverse research careers – How is it defined?

Diverse research careers refer to the broad range of pathways available to researchers beyond traditional academic tenure-track positions. This includes careers in industry, public sector research, science communication, policy-making, entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary research. The concept also encompasses diversity in backgrounds, disciplines, career mobility, and working conditions, ensuring that researchers from different personal and professional contexts have access to fulfilling career paths.

The ***Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment***, published in July 2022 by the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), sets out a shared vision and set of commitments for improving how research and researchers are evaluated. At the heart of the Agreement is the commitment to recognise the **diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research**, in line with the needs and nature of different disciplines and research contexts. This means moving beyond narrow indicators—such as publication counts or journal impact factors—and instead embracing a more inclusive approach that values a wide range of research activities, outputs, and roles. The Agreement calls for recognition of contributions such as peer review, supervision, mentoring, teaching, leadership, open science practices, and collaboration—both within and beyond academia. It also highlights the importance of valuing research outputs communicated in different formats and languages, and acknowledging career paths such as data stewardship, software engineering, science communication, and science advice. In this context, CoARA

encourages institutions to broaden what they value—while respecting disciplinary differences and acknowledging that no individual researcher is expected to excel in all areas.

Building on these efforts to reform research assessment and support more inclusive academic careers, the ***Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe*** (or the new European Charter for Researchers) further strengthens the case for valuing diverse research careers. As part of its fourth pillar—*Research Careers and Talent Development*—the Recommendation underscores the importance of recognising the wide range of roles and pathways that researchers may pursue, both within and beyond academia. It calls on employers and funders to adopt diversity-sensitive and talent-based approaches to assessment, which consider varied forms of mobility (interdisciplinary, intersectoral, international, and virtual), as well as contributions such as teaching, mentoring, supervision, peer review, science communication, entrepreneurship, leadership, Open Science, and collaboration with industry or society at large.
The Recommendation also highlights the need to create enabling conditions for researchers' career development across sectors. In particular, it calls for measures to help researchers—especially those in the early stages of their careers—become aware of opportunities in different sectors and disciplines, and to support their professional growth through targeted career advice, mentoring, and continuous skills development. Institutions are encouraged to actively promote a culture of career diversification, which includes providing support services that facilitate intersectoral, interdisciplinary, and geographical mobility, as well as fostering entrepreneurial mindsets and innovation. These measures are essential to ensure that research careers remain attractive, resilient, and aligned with the evolving needs of society and the labour market.

Moreover, **The *Council Recommendation on Attractive and Sustainable Careers in Higher Education***, adopted in 2024, calls on EU Member States to promote, acknowledge, and value the full diversity of academic roles, with respect for institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It encourages governments and higher education institutions to enhance human resources policies so they better recognise and reward a wide range of academic staff activities—not only research, but also teaching, entrepreneurship and innovation, knowledge valorisation, local and international cooperation, community engagement, mentoring, leadership, administration, and participation in institutional governance. A key focus of the Recommendation is the need to achieve *parity of esteem* between teaching and research, including in staff appraisal and promotion, and to support academic staff who champion excellence in teaching and learning. It also stresses the importance of facilitating more flexible and permeable career paths across roles, sectors, and countries, while acknowledging the value of professional development, teaching enhancement, and career breaks.
The Recommendation underlines the need for better working conditions, support for work-life balance, and inclusive practices to make academic careers more attractive and sustainable. It explicitly calls for greater recognition of the diverse roles played by academic and professional staff, including cross-border educational activities. And it is part of a broader EU effort to modernise higher education systems and create conditions in which diverse academic contributions are acknowledged, supported, and rewarded.

2. Best practice examples

The following best practice examples were selected based on 3 main criteria or key strengths that should be part of recognition and support of diverse research career:

Figure 1. Key strengths of a recognition and support of diverse research career programme

CRITERIA	EXPLANATION
Recognition of diverse research careers	They have research assessment mechanism that value diverse types of research activities and outputs, further from the traditionally recognized ones. This category includes, among other, award and recognition programmes.
Support of diverse research careers	They offer financial support for advancing research projects or activities, but also for experience exchange, cross-sectoral and international mobility, cross-sectoral skills development and flexible grant structures.
Support for career transitions	They offer opportunities that allow researchers to pursue careers in different sectors, including support for the transition from academia to industry, and aim for contributing to life – work balance and career advancement with equal opportunities.

Source: Author's interpretation

3 good practice examples have been chosen from a multitude of existing support programmes. Each of them effectively addresses at least one of the before mentioned strengths.

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (EU)

Overview of the programme

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) is a flagship European funding program under Horizon Europe that supports researcher mobility, training, and career development across all disciplines and sectors. Established by the European Commission, MSCA aims to enhance research excellence, foster innovation, and strengthen intersectoral and international collaboration. Since its inception in 1996, MSCA has been instrumental in nurturing a diverse research community, facilitating collaborations regardless of geographical and sectoral focus[1].
The program funds individual fellowships, doctoral networks, staff exchanges, and co-funded research projects, enabling researchers at all career stages to develop their skills and expand their professional networks.

Under the current Horizon Europe framework (2021-2027), MSCA continues to offer a variety of funding opportunities designed to equip researchers with the necessary skills and international experience to tackle societal challenges and drive innovation. The program's comprehensive

[1] https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/

approach aims not only to support researchers in enhancing their scientific expertise but also to acquire transferable skills, enhancing their employability across various sectors[2].
MSCA's commitment to inclusivity is evident in its support for researchers at all career stages, from doctoral candidates to experienced researchers. By encouraging mobility across borders, sectors, and disciplines, MSCA fosters a diverse and dynamic research environment that is responsive to global challenges.

Moreover, the MSCA is highly attractive and competitive, with an overall success rate of just 16% across its funding instruments[3]. This reflects the program's prestige and the high demand among researchers and institutions.

Innovative aspects and key strengths
3 main innovative approaches:

- Flexibility and inclusiveness to research careers
- Focus on broad and cross-sectoral skills development
- Wide geographical scope

One of the defining features of MSCA is its flexible and inclusive approach to research careers. The program encourages researchers to gain experience across sectors, including academia, industry, and public administration, helping them build diverse career paths. Another important element is the emphasis on broad skills development, including leadership, entrepreneurship, communication, and policymaking, which enhances researchers' employability beyond academia. The program also stands out for its global reach, welcoming researchers from all over the world and fostering international cooperation.

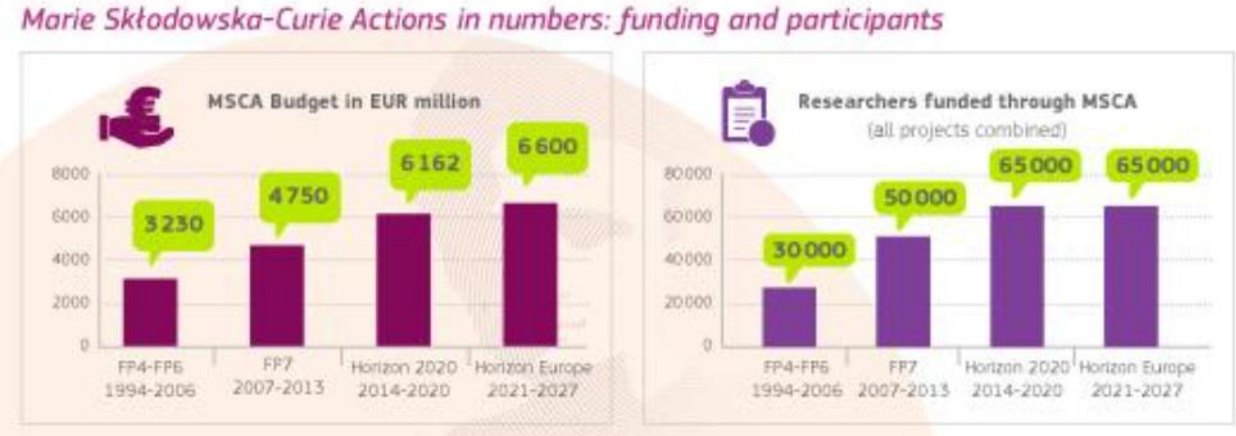
Main benefits for researchers
For researchers, MSCA provides important **career-building opportunities**. International and intersectoral mobility allows them to work in different cultural and professional settings, broadening their expertise and networks. The program also strengthens their professional skills, making them highly competitive in both academic and non-academic job markets. Based on the available data provided through the official website of MSCA, due to the fellowship programme researchers successfully transition into permanent roles, in or outside academia, demonstrating the program's effectiveness in opening diverse career pathways[4].

MSCA's strong support makes it an attractive program for researchers. Participants benefit from research funding, and mobility allowances, ensuring they have the necessary resources to focus on their work. The program is also committed to equal opportunities and diversity, encouraging participation from different groups and promoting gender balance in research.

[2] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/marie-sklodowska-curie-actions_en
[3] https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/news/msca-study-interim-evaluation-horizon-europe
[4] https://horizon.scienceblog.com/1863/marie-sklodowska-curie-actions-supporting-europes-best-and-brightest-researchers-for-25-years/

Since its inception, the MSCA has supported over 145,000 researchers from approximately 160 nationalities, hosted by organizations in over 130 countries. This global reach underscores the program's commitment to fostering international collaboration and mobility in research[5]. Moreover, the MSCA have been associated with significant scientific advancements, including contributions to Nobel Prize-winning research. For instance, from 2013 to 2023, the program supported 18 Nobel laureates, highlighting its role in nurturing top-tier research talent[6].

Figure 2. Achievements of MSCA programme by financial cycles



Source: https://rea.ec.europa.eu/news/marie-sklodowska-curie-actions-game-changing-benchmark-programme-talented-researchers-worldwide-all-2024-02-29_en

62% of programme beneficiaries are women and 42% were PhD candidates[7], which shows a great emphasis put on providing equal opportunities for men and women, but also on provided access to training and mobility project to young research, for which these types of activities can significantly impact their future career path.

Resources / Useful links

For more information on funding opportunities and eligibility, the **MSCA Official Website** provides detailed guidance.

[5] Idem
[6] https://rea.ec.europa.eu/news/marie-sklodowska-curie-actions-game-changing-benchmark-programme-talented-researchers-worldwide-all-2024-02-29_en
[7] Idem

NWO Talent Programme (Netherlands)

Overview of the programme

The NWO Talent Programme, formerly known as the Vernieuwingsimpuls, is a prestigious initiative by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) aimed at fostering innovation in Dutch academic research and **enhancing the career prospects of researchers at various stages of their careers**. Established in 2000, the programme offers personal grants through three main funding instruments:

- **Veni:** Targeted at researchers who have recently obtained their PhD, providing them with the opportunity to further develop their ideas over a period of three years. The maximum grant amount is €320,000.
- **Vidi:** Designed for experienced researchers who have conducted several years of research post-PhD, allowing them to develop their own innovative line of research and potentially appoint scientific staff. The maximum grant amount is €850,000 for a duration of five years.
- **Vici:** Aimed at senior researchers who have demonstrated the ability to develop their own research line, offering up to €1.5 million over five years to expand their research group[8].

The programme covers 4 main domains: science domain, social sciences and humanities, applied and engineering sciences and health research and development[9].

Innovative aspects and key strengths

The NWO Talent Programme incorporates several innovative approaches that distinguish it within the research funding landscape:

- Flexibility and inclusiveness in research careers;
- Emphasis on leadership and mentorship development;
- Promotion of research independence.

The programme's tiered structure—comprising Veni, Vidi, and Vici grants—caters to researchers at various career stages, from recent PhD graduates to established senior researchers. This design ensures that support is tailored to individual development needs, promoting inclusivity and flexibility in career progression. Beyond funding research projects, the programme places significant emphasis on cultivating leadership and mentorship skills among researchers. This focus equips participants with the competencies necessary to lead research teams and contribute to the academic community effectively.

By providing dedicated grants, the programme empowers researchers to establish and pursue independent research lines. This autonomy fosters innovation and allows researchers to explore novel ideas without the constraints often associated with other types of funding mechanisms.

Benefits for Researchers

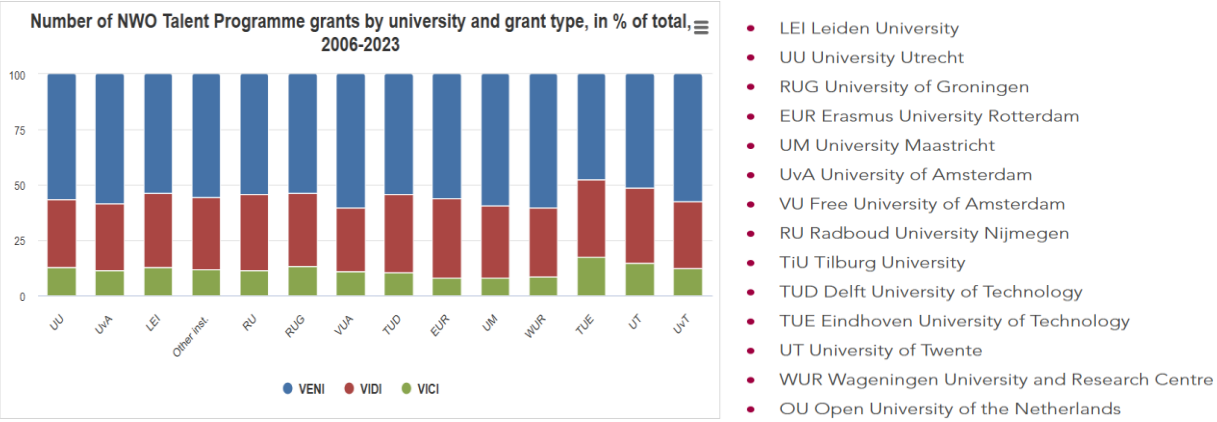
[8] https://www.nwo.nl/en/calls/nwo-talent-programme
[9] Idem

Participation in the NWO Talent Programme offers numerous advantages that significantly enhance researchers' careers:

- Career Advancement: Available data indicates that many laureates progress to higher academic positions following their grant award. Specifically, there is a notable decrease in the proportion of postdoctoral researchers and assistant professors among laureates, suggesting upward mobility within academia[10].
- Research Autonomy and Capacity Building: The substantial funding associated with each grant category enables researchers to develop their own research groups and lines of inquiry. For instance, Vidi and Vici grants allow recipients to appoint additional research staff, thereby expanding their research capacity and fostering collaborative opportunities.
- Enhanced Competitiveness for Future Funding: The prestige associated with the NWO Talent Programme enhances recipients' profiles, making them more competitive candidates for subsequent funding opportunities. This recognition facilitates sustained research efforts and contributes to long-term career stability.

Overall, the NWO Talent Programme's innovative structure and comprehensive support mechanisms not only advance individual researchers' careers but also contribute to the broader dynamism and excellence of the Dutch research ecosystem. Between 2006 and 2025, over 5,800 grants have been awarded, with approximately 56% being Veni grants, 32% Vidi, and 12% Vici[11]. The figure below shows a similar cover of types pf grants by each benefitting university. Thus, the access of young research to the opportunities of the programme has been equally distributed among Higher Education Institutions.

Figure 3. Number of NOW Talent Programme grants by university and grant type (Netherlands)



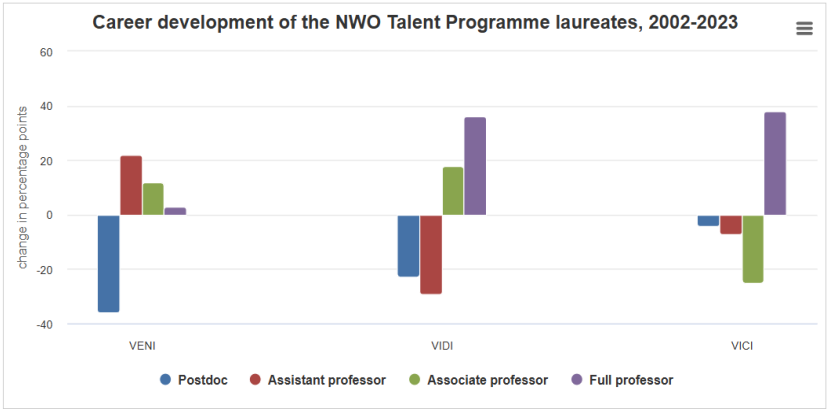
Source: https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/process/excellence/nwo-talent-programme-research-grants-university-and-type-grant

[10] https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/process/excellence/career-development-nwo-talent-programme-laureates

[11] https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/process/excellence/nwo-talent-programme-research-grants-university-and-type-grant

Moreover, the NWO Talent Programme aims to attract scientific talent into the research community by assessing and recognizing outstandin research proposals. Specifically, the Veni grant targets postdoctoral researchers seeking a career in science. Data from NWO shows significant career progression for researchers awarded Veni, Vidi, and Vici grants, with many laureates advancing to academic positions over time[12].

Figure 4. Career development of NWO Talent Programme grants laureates, 2002 - 2023



Resources / Useful links

For more information on funding opportunities and eligibility criteria: https://www.nwo.nl/en/calls/nwo-talent-programme and https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/process/excellence/nwo-talent-programme-research-grants-university-and-type-grant.

[12] https://www.rathenau.nl/en/science-figures/process/excellence/career-development-nwo-talent-programme-laureates

TALENT Programme (United Kingdom)

Overview of the project

The TALENT Programme, initiated in 2020 by Midlands Innovation, a consortium formed of 8 universities working in collaboration with key stakeholder and industry partners, represents a significant investment in technical skills, roles, and careers within UK higher education. Supported by a £3 million grant from the Research England Development (RED) Fund, the programme aimed to **revolutionize the landscape for technicians in academia**, who have historically been undervalued despite their crucial contributions to research and innovation[13]. The programme was concluded in February 2024.

Its structure was comprised of four key components:

- **National Policy Commission:** This component focused on understanding the future requirements for skilled technicians in the UK higher education sector, aiming to guide policy and workforce planning by providing insights into the evolving needs of technical roles.
- **Cultural Advocacy:** This pillar involved collaborative efforts to promote a cultural shift within institutions, aiming to raise the profile of technical careers. By enhancing career pathways and possibilities, it seeked to ensure that technical roles are recognized and valued.
- **Training and Development Programme:** The third component was a comprehensive programme offering training and development opportunities tailored for the Midlands Innovation technical community, which covered over 2,100 full-time equivalents. The knowledge and experiences gained were shared across the broader sector to maximize impact.
- **Sector-Wide Advocacy:** This component focused on developing opportunities for technicians across the higher education sector, ensuring that technical careers are supported, developed, respected, and ultimately aspired to[14].

Collectively, these components were structured to empower technical professionals, foster positive workplace cultures, and address knowledge gaps about the technical workforce in higher education and research.

Innovative aspects and key strengths

The programme covered several innovative elements, among which the most relevant were:

- Cultural Change and Advocacy – The programme actively promoted the integration of technicians into leadership and strategic decision-making processes.
- Comprehensive Data-Driven Approach – The TALENT Commission's research bridged knowledge gaps in workforce planning, ensuring technicians receive the recognition and support they deserve.

[13] chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://itss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/The-TALENT-Commission-Report.pdf

[14] https://itss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TALENT-Programme-Interventions-and-Impact-Report.pdf

- Sector-Wide Collaboration – The initiative was not limited to Midlands Innovation, covering the entire UK higher education sector, creating a blueprint for best practices in technical workforce management.

Overall, the TALENT Programme serves as a best practice example of advocating for and supporting technical staff in higher education, ensuring their contributions are recognized and valued.

Main Benefits for researchers (technicians)

The 4-year programme led to important results for the technician community in UK. A video presentation of the programme's results, including testimonials, is available here: https://itss.org.uk/talent-legacy/. The most important impacts, as presented in the final report of the programme[15] and as perceived by participants are:

- Empowerment and Recognition – Technicians experienced greater visibility and acknowledgment, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and workplace culture.
- Career Development and Training – Tailored professional development opportunities helped technicians advance their careers and gain new skills.
- Stronger Workforce Planning – The insights generated by TALENT helped institutions better support and invest in their technical workforce, ensuring long-term sustainability.

The TALENT Programme has played a pivotal role in driving cultural change within the sector, significantly increasing the recognition and visibility of technical professionals. Breakthroughs such as the **introduction of technician-authored submissions in REF 2029** and **the creation of new career pathways at universities like Liverpool and Warwick**, as underlined in the final report reflecting the intervention and its impact[16], indicate a growing sector-wide acknowledgment of technicians' vital contributions.

However, challenges to full implementation persist. Among other, the programme resulted in a well-documented set of 16 recommendations, structured into 5 categories as it follows: Hiring, Training and development for the current workforce, EDI, Recognition, and Decision-making[17]. Key recommendations—such as defining the roles of technical and academic staff more clearly, enhancing the clarity of technical career paths, and improving the recognition of technicians' contributions—still encounter resistance due to limited resources, a lack of understanding of the value of technicians and resistance to institutional change.

Resources / Useful links

For more information about the programme, access: https://itss.org.uk/talent-legacy/. Further, data on the structure of the programme and on its effects can be found in the following report: https://midlandsinnovation.org.uk/latest/news/mi-technicians-share-experiences-from-transformational-talent-programme/

[15] Idem

[16] https://itss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TALENT-Programme-Interventions-and-Impact-Report.pdf

[17] The Economic Benefits of Implementing the Talent Commission Recommendations, Annex B., March 2023, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://itss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/The-Economic-Value-of-Implementing-of-the-TALENT-Commission-Recommendations.pdf

3. Key takeaways

Broadening research career recognition

The evolving approach to research assessment emphasizes the need for valuing diverse career paths beyond traditional academic roles. The CoARA Agreement and the European Charter for Researchers highlight the need to recognize varied contributions such as peer review, mentoring, teaching, open science practices, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Similarly, the Council Recommendation on Attractive and Sustainable Careers in Higher Education[18] stresses the importance of achieving parity between teaching and research, supporting career flexibility, and ensuring inclusive recognition frameworks.

Enhancing career support and mobility

Effective support mechanisms for researchers include financial aid, mobility opportunities, and professional development initiatives. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the NWO Talent Programme provide funding for international and cross-sectoral mobility, leadership training, and research independence. These initiatives help researchers navigate career transitions, gain transferable skills, and secure long-term professional growth both within and outside academia.

Institutional and cultural change in research careers

Structural reforms in research careers require institutional support, workforce planning, and cultural shifts in academia. The TALENT Programme in the UK has demonstrated the importance of recognizing technical roles, integrating technicians into leadership, and advocating for sustainable workforce policies. Broader EU-level recommendations also stress improving working conditions, work-life balance, and career development programmes to make research careers more attractive and resilient.

[18] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32024H07282