

European Best Practices on Working Conditions within the Academia and Research Institutions

Introduction

The commission issued a set of measures in order to both strengthen the European Research Area and to promote attractive research careers. The aim is to encourage young researchers and talents to remain in Europe, by supporting stable, well-paid and attractive research careers paths.

The set of measures include

- A new *European framework for research careers*
- A new *Charter for Researchers*
- The *European Competence Framework for Researchers* (ResearchComp)

In short, the European framework for research careers addresses challenges researchers face in Europe, by providing a clear definition of the research profession and supporting better working conditions and the possibility of development and progression.

The Charter for Researchers proposes a new set of principles and requirements for both researchers and employers.

ResearchComp is the first EU Competence Framework for Researchers and focuses on the set of transversal skills a researcher should be equipped with in order to boost inter-sectoral careers (academia, business, industry, public administration or start-ups)

Best practices measures for improving working conditions

The aforementioned documents represent the pillars for improving the working conditions for researchers. These frameworks outline various best practices that could and should be implemented by the European institutions in order to establish a better working environment for researchers.

Some of the measures that have been taken throughout Europe are related to more stable employment contracts, transparency when it comes to the recruitment process and the option for professional development (such as workshops, training, individualised career development plans etc.)

There is also an interest for a better research environment, especially the provision of supportive infrastructure and resources, the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and networking and access and fair allocation of funding and grant applications. Collaborations and networking can also be achieved through mobility options and, evidently, the recognition of the mobility experience and the added value it brings to career development.

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Ethics is another hot topic, hence promoting integrity, transparency and responsible research practice has become another priority within the research realm.

Another focus of the research career framework is the balance between work and private life. Institutions should offer flexible working hours, the option of telecommuting and a variety of family-friendly policies.

Other practices within institutions that support a better and fair working environment are promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion, effective administrative processes that help researchers navigate through the bureaucratic activities and strong evaluation and recognition measures for fairly evaluating research performance and career progression and implementing recognition and rewards systems when it is deemed necessary.

Best practices

Based on the principles promoted by the European Commission and the examples of actions supporting research careers and working conditions, we have identified a series of best practices at the European level related to a better working environment for researchers.

Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPG) - Germany

The Max Planck Institute is a German non-university research institution. The organisation has committed itself to support early-career researchers by addressing the hot issue of job insecurity and replacing it with options for long-term research careers. Hence postdocs receive great support in reaching personal goals regarding their qualification, since the MPG hires them with open-end contracts over stipend-based employment. The goal is also to standardise the contract length and the salaries for the incoming postdocs.¹

Moreover, new researchers can benefit from mentorship programs and they are fully integrated into research teams, in order to understand and successfully perform in their positions.

According to their own website, the Max Planck Institute, provides equal family-friendly working conditions for both men and women and they especially support women in those particular areas where they are misrepresented and in their career development. MPG has an equal opportunity office that provides support, advice and assistance on equal opportunities issues. They also have an international office that

¹ Jacob D. Davidson, Felipe Nathan de Oliveira Lopes, Sajjad Safaei, Friederike Hillermann, Nicholas J. Russel, H. Lina Schaare, "Postdoctoral researchers perspectives on working conditions and equal opportunities in German academia"

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helps foreign researchers to find accommodation and also manages the institute apartments that are available for short-term stays for their foreign employees.

As for balancing work and family life, MPG offers flexible working hours, so that employees may also take care of children or the elderly. They have partnerships with day-care centres and provide advice and support for balancing child care to individual needs.

Karolinska Institutet - Sweden

Karolinska Institute is a research-led medical university in Stockholm and one of the foremost medical research institutes globally. It is an institution that has initiated a variety of measures for improving the working conditions of its researchers such as extensive parental leave policies, on-campus child care facilities, thus ensuring a work-life balance. The institute is also concerned of their employees well-being and it offers staff support through telephone counselling, namely direct advice for any psychosocial issues that might affect the employees life and work.

When it comes to the flexibility of the working hours, Karolinska Institutet can be considered as a best practice, since "the employees have the opportunity to arrange their working hours based on the organisational needs, in dialogue with the immediate manager"²

The institution also carries on workshops on grant writing, project management and leadership skills, in order to help researchers in their career development and provide them with a better chance to advance.

The overall objective of the institute, as stated in their guidelines for work environment is that "KI shall be a safe and secure place to work and study, characterised by clarity in terms of organisation and division of responsibilities and active work environment and health management. The working and study environment at KI should be characterised by a good social climate with mutual respect, consideration and accountability, encouraging and fair leadership, participation and empowerment. There should also be conditions for reflection and recovery in the work/study."³

University of Cambridge - United Kingdom

Related to the topic of professional advancement, the University of Cambridge offers researcher development programs, including training in transferable skills, career advice, mentoring, coaching, work-shadowing, re-training, job-rotation, secondment and financial support for participating in international events. There is also an emphasis on advice and guidance given by managers and peers, including reading

² Karolinska Institutet - <https://staff.ki.se/tools-and-support/support-for-hr-staff/working-hours>

³ Karolinska Institutet - <https://staff.ki.se/tools-and-support/steering-documents/guidelines-for-work-environment-and-health>

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lists and professional sources of information. Facilities for training are provided for employees and the learning process is overseen by experienced peers.

- Personal and Professional Development (PPD) provide a centrally organised programme of staff development courses and activities.
- University Information Services (UIS) provide a wide range of training courses for all staff.
- The University Language Centre offers staff language-learning and teaching services for work-related language learning needs.⁴

Other university support services include a counselling service, a mediation service and a service related to various health issues.

The university implements the flexible working hours practice and the option to work remotely, thus ensuring an improved productivity and a focus on the work-life balance.

Moreover, the university conducted research on the topic of working hours. Among other findings, researchers came up with creative policy options concerning a future limited work load, such as working just a couple of hours a day, increasing annual holiday - even having two months off for every month at work. "They also argue that working hour reduction and redistribution could improve work-life balance, increase productivity, and cut down CO2 emissions from commuting. However, they point out that reduction of hours would need to be for everyone, to avoid increasing socioeconomic inequalities."⁵

Delft University of Technology (TU Delft)- Netherlands

TU Delft applied for the HRS4R Awards, because the university endorses the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the recruitment of researchers. In this context, TU Delft committed to implementing a tenure track system that provides clear and transparent criteria for career progression, ensuring researchers understand the requirements for advancing their careers.

Based on the action plan provided during the HRS4R Award process, the university will "develop workshops for tenure-track staff to help them provide good supervision to their PhD students throughout their doctoral programmes"⁶. According to their self-assessment reports, their tenure track policy "aims

⁴ University of Cambridge - <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/capability-policy/capability-guidance/support-staff-and-managers>

⁵ University of Cambridge - <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/employment-dosage>

⁶ TU Delft University, Gap analysis and action plan - <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/about-tu-delft/working-at-tu-delft/why-work-at-the-tu-delft/hr-excellence-in-research>

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at offering assistant professors with high potential career paths to progress to the ranks of associate professor and eventually full professors”⁷. Hence, all requirements are transparent and clearly stated: for example, the Academic Career Track (ACT) takes a maximum of 8 years and academics involved will get a permanent contract after 12 or 18 months, which should remove the uncertainty about the duration of their employment.

The university also believes in the importance of the all-rounder training and in the investments made into the human resources. TU Delft offers an extensive ACT Development Program, consisting of a wide range of training courses and instruments in all areas of the academic career. Moreover, if the associate professor career/position is not a fit, it helps you find a suitable solution based on personal qualities and interests, within the broader university network.

Another positive aspect is the dedicated office for grant applications which offers support in preparing and submitting grant applications, thus increasing chances of securing funding.

Aalto University - Finland

According to their own statements, the Finnish university provides an inspiring and supportive working environment, because they believe that “healthy and happy employees are more productive, inspired and engaged.”⁸ They offer a variety of services, such as wellness programs, mental health support, fitness facilities, stress management workshops, sports services, social networks, in order to maintain a healthy work-life balance and to reach an overall well-being of their researchers. They also organise many events for their international staff so that they experience a smooth integration and they offer their staff the opportunity to develop language skills and tips to work in a multicultural environment.

In terms of self-development, they support career and competence development by creating opportunities for career advancement, flexible job rotation or the option of shifting to a parallel career. Aalto University has identified five core competency areas that they consider crucial⁹: (1) *working together* - networking, relating, equality, diversity and inclusion, (2) *insightful expertise* - apply and share expertise, (3) *learning agility and creativity* - creative community, (4) *achieving excellence* - taking initiative and accountability, (5) *empowering leadership* - ensuring that leaders empower people. In this context, they organise regular discussions between supervisors and their team members about goals, achievements and development - “My Dialogues”.

⁷ TU Delft University, Internal analysis, Gap analysis and Action plan - <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/about-tu-delft/working-at-tu-delft/why-work-at-the-tu-delft/hr-excellence-in-research>

⁸ Aalto University - <https://www.aalto.fi/en/careers-at-aalto/employee-benefits-and-wellbeing>

⁹ Aalto University - <https://www.aalto.fi/en/careers-at-aalto/self-development-at-aalto>

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Aalto University also focuses on career and competence development by providing a wide range of training and development options for researchers to grow professionally and to be guided at each stage of their careers.

Aarhus University - Denmark

The university has very thorough career development planning, where researchers can develop their own skills and understand their options in relation to the job market, in the form of workshops and seminars for opportunities and "market yourself" abilities. In addition they deliver customised workshops for researcher networks, researcher groups, journal clubs association, that can be adjusted to specific needs.

It also respects the transparency principle when it comes to performance evaluation, using clear and transparent criteria and ensuring a fair assessment and recognition for the researchers' work. Junior researchers benefit from favourable employment perspectives and the administration provides a detailed description of the career pathways for young researchers, opportunities and methods for career planning. They have identified four main career paths¹⁰: (1) *Stay in Academia* - master a wide spectrum of competences, including management skills, writing grant applications, overview on the international funding landscape (2) *Research in Industry and Public Sector* - develop skills to continue research in labs, consultancy bodies, museums, etc. (3) *Careers using generic academic skills* - master skills for other types of careers such as data analyst, project management and leadership, consultancy, teaching and communication or technical development and support (4) *Becoming an Entrepreneur* - either doing research by commercialising/pitching ideas or starting your own company.

Another example of focusing on better working conditions and supporting career development and progression is the endorsement of different career planning tools - MyIDP, ImaginePhD, Vitae¹¹.

AU also stresses the importance of favourable working conditions, such as collective agreements for a safe workplace, fair wages, flexible hours and as a foreign researcher, you are eligible for a special tax scheme, actions that fall within the supportive Danish policies and working philosophy.

University of Vienna - Austria

The University of Vienna offers a wide range of training opportunities, including workshops on scientific writing, data analysis, and public speaking, helping researchers develop essential skills for their careers development and progression.

¹⁰ Aarhus University - <https://talent.au.dk/career-paths>

¹¹ Aarhus University - <https://talent.au.dk/career-tools>

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In terms of work and life balance, the university has implemented various family-friendly policies, such as flexible working hours, part-time work options, and financial support for childcare.

These examples highlight how various institutions across Europe are implementing best practices to improve the working conditions for researchers, in order to promote a supportive and productive research environment. In a nutshell, the main areas of action are: offering stable employment contracts, ensuring a transparent recruitment process, providing means for continuous professional development and career planning, promoting national or international interdisciplinary collaboration and mobility, adopting a code of ethics and ethics training, access to funding and resources, administrative support through dedicated support offices, transparent evaluation criteria coupled with recognition and rewards and a real work-life balance.

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