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THREE STEPS TO MAKE CAREERS IN ACADEMIA MORE ATTRACTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

Introduction

The European Commission (DG EAC) has recently launched a **call for evidence** for a Higher Education policy package aiming, among other things, to promote "diverse, sustainable and attractive academic careers". This initiative is in line with the Commission's objectives of improving the careers of researchers and those working in academia, while also making Europe more attractive to talent. Such objectives are rooted in two key policy documents by the European Commission (EC): the Communication "A new ERA for Research and Innovation" (2021) and the "European Strategy for Universities" (2022).

These policy initiatives have opened the door to historical advancements in both policymaking and academic culture: the first, leading to the launch of the European Framework for research careers, and the establishment of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), which today features more than 600 signatories globally and two YERUN members in its Steering Board (President and Board member); and the second leading to this reflection on how to improve the attractiveness of academic careers more broadly.

YERUN has been a key contributor to these developments from the start, by participating in numerous formal and informal consultations and providing its input in policy papers:
- **Reforming research assessment in Europe: YERUN's take on the issue** (YERUN paper, November 2021)
- **Rethinking Academic Careers** (YERUN paper, June 2022)
- **Towards a European Framework for Sustainable and Attractive Careers in Higher Education** (YERUN paper, June 2023)
- **European university associations welcome proposal for Council Recommendation on research careers – further steps needed** (Joint statement, November 2023).

Three years since the beginning of the work on the reform of research assessment, YERUN welcomes the steps taken so far by policymakers and the academic community, which show a common understanding of the challenges at stake and a shared commitment to tackle them together. To continue making progress in a streamlined manner, we reiterate our caution **against producing parallel frameworks** by failing to align these initiatives. It is crucial to approach them in a holistic way that truly resonates with all roles and professions addressed - notably, academics combining research and other responsibilities, as well as professional services staff supporting research or education or both.

Aware of the **permeability of careers in academia**, we advise against establishing a "framework for teachers and professional services staff" as opposed to a "framework for researchers", but rather encourage an integrated policy venue that allow us to **shed light on the complexity and richness** of these careers **and co-create measures and innovative approaches** to make all of them more attractive and sustainable.

The current consultation gives us the opportunity to complement the ongoing efforts to improve careers of highly trained professionals, by **looking at academic careers more widely** and shed light on some of the problems that continue to affect careers in higher education (here broadly intended as academics and professional services staff).

Three steps to make careers in academia more attractive and sustainable

YERUN believes that the key to making careers in academia more attractive and sustainable is rooted in 1) **Celebrating the diversity of contributions and creating paths for talent to grow** in all its forms; 2) **Creating adequate support systems for continuous skills development** for everyone to progress in academia in line with their interests and talents; 3) **Empowering universities with adequate framework conditions** to support diverse career developments.

Hereby we explain why these three measures are important and how they can make a difference.

Step 1: Celebrating the diversity of contributions and creating paths for talent to grow

Careers in academia often evolve in very broad and non-linear ways to cover different aspects and tasks, ranging from research to education, knowledge valorisation, leadership, management, communication, and service to society. A classic example is that of a researcher who is also involved in teaching, managing projects, and building partnerships of cooperation with other institutions or sectors. Another common case is that of a project manager who is involved in proposal writing, administrative tasks of various nature, leadership activities within their team, mentoring and so on. In a way, the flexibility and permeability of one's tasks and skills are embedded in the very nature of jobs in academia, where research, teaching, administration, communication, and leadership give and take from each other in a symbiotic way and where teamwork has become the norm.

However, growing demands in all these fronts and an ever-increasing competitive environment have broken this harmony. The diversity of roles and tasks is not well recognised in terms of reputation and career progression, with a persistent imbalance in the weight given to some research-related outputs over other types of activities (such as education, leadership, knowledge valorisation, open science, internationalisation, etc.). A more balanced approach would encourage everyone to contribute with their own talents and competences to the collective work carried out within universities by **valuing their diverse contributions** through more comprehensive recognition systems and by **developing diverse career paths** (as well explained in the '[Room for everyone's talent](#)' position paper led by Universities of the Netherlands, KNAW, NFU, NWO and ZonMw and actively implemented by Maastricht University, and in the [NOR-CAM](#), a toolbox for recognition and rewards in academic careers developed by Universities Norway).

We welcome the much needed progress that reforms such as those spearheaded by CoARA (Coalition for advancing research assessment) are bringing forward in the recognition of this diversity in research profiles. At the same time, we believe that there is still an urgent need to increase and balance out the opportunities offered for **everyone working in academia**, irrespective of whether someone chooses to **focus on education, research, community engagement or management**. It is crucial that this initiative leads to a **full recognition of the interwoven nature of these tasks.**

- ***Taking Step 1 together***: *Fostering nation-wide approaches to evaluation and recognition that celebrate the diversity of the roles that characterise careers in universities, support professionals to progress in line with their talents and interests (through incentives and trainings) and develop more diverse career paths is part of the effort to make careers in academia more attractive and sustainable. If Member States adopted such innovative approaches, it would be much easier for universities to adjust their hiring and promotion criteria, thanks to a supportive and conducive regulatory framework. The EU could continue in its role of facilitating peer learning and coherence across its Member States.*

Step 2: Creating adequate support systems for continuous skills development

In a world that undergoes rapid changes and new emerging challenges, universities and their staff are under constant and growing pressure to solve many issues very quickly (e.g. climate change, AI, pandemics, etc.). These challenges require new advanced skills and knowledge: those working in academia **need to be supported and empowered accordingly to develop in line with these growing skill demands.**

Let's take the specific case of teaching. Teaching is becoming more and more complex, with the emergence of new tools, digitalisation, new labour market needs, and an increasingly globalised world. Teachers need to be equipped accordingly. This is crucial for them to continue being effective knowledge brokers that inspire new generations to develop appropriate skills and attitudes to tackle present and future challenges. Teachers need support to develop the necessary skills to e.g. integrate more innovative pedagogical methods, leverage on digital technologies and artificial intelligence, embed sustainability in their courses, respond to lifelong learning demands, make learning attractive to diverse groups of learners, and integrate international collaborations within their study programmes, while ensuring that their content is shared with the rest of the world in line with Open Education principles. This demands substantial resources and specialised skills. However, the lack of support and incentives available from higher education funders, the lack of time, and the unbalanced emphasis given to some research outputs, this is often sacrificed in favour of other activities that can ensure career progression, leaving it to few passionate pioneers to lead innovation in education.

- ***Taking Step 2 together:*** *The Council Recommendation should highlight the crucial importance of investing in skills development to help those working in universities build and strengthen the knowledge needed to face the above challenges and demands. This is key to empower the roles relating to teaching, community engagement, knowledge valorisation, management, leadership, and support activities. Support can be provided in the form of trainings, professional sabbaticals, peer learning events and opportunities, awards, etc. and the relating activities should be better reflected in career tracks. At EU level, innovative ideas could be explored such as launching a prestigious funding programme supporting innovative educational excellence, on a par with MSCA and/or ERC which target research excellence.*

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Step 3: Empowering universities with adequate framework conditions

Universities across Europe share a common challenge of continually adapting to changes in funding priorities which inhibit long term strategic governance as well as a balanced whole-of-institution planning of human resources. Talent in universities will only thrive if institutions can rely on **sustainable funding** to facilitate self-governance and a **genuine transformation in line with their institutional vision,** and if they have the **necessary flexibility for a more targeted channelling of resources in line with their needs.**

Essential pre-conditions for this are a more consistent, coherent, and coordinated approach to diverse funding sources available for higher education, such as funding from the EU, national governments, project funding, private investments, etc., and legislative frameworks that are flexible enough for synergies to happen.

Adequate regulatory and financial conditions will also empower universities to invest in skills development with appropriate social protection measures in place. Further to equipping professionals with the needed skills to excel in their tasks (see measure 2), this can also help prevent job insecurity by building venues for diversified and rich circular career paths between academia and other sectors, while offering educators, researchers, and support staff the autonomy to craft their preferred career trajectories. By shifting the discourse from brain drain to brain gain, this approach ensures a more dynamic and flourishing talent pool within the academic community, without disincentivising international and intersectoral mobilities.

- *Taking Step 3 together: The Council recommendation should acknowledge that, while a balanced combination of diverse funding sources is crucial for promoting change, sustained attractiveness of human resources requires strong institutions that can define strong human resources strategies aligned with their vision and mission. This requires institutional autonomy and adequate basic and life-cycle funding. Moreover, a good balance will need to be found between facilitating permeability across sectors and retaining talent: while sound and forward-looking workforce strategies will invest in opportunities for skills development that will (also) contribute to the permeability of careers across sectors, universities will still need to be equipped with the necessary resources to remain attractive to talent and avoid becoming victim of unintended brain drain.*

Conclusions

The strategies and policies developed by governments will be of little use without highly motivated and skilled university staff that will work on their implementation. The development of attractive and sustainable careers in academia is, therefore, of utmost importance not because it is high on the European policy agenda, but because universities must remain a safe haven for building and sharing knowledge, critical thinking and creative ideas.

There is a need to recognise, reward and support the entire higher education community, as **fulfilling diverse university missions requires a collective effort.** The provision of an adequate structure and a balanced set of incentives to encourage knowledge discovery, its transformation through teaching, and transfer to the broader community (knowledge valorisa-

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-tion), along with ample resources and appropriate support for skills development, is crucial for our universities' competitiveness.

A comprehensive strategy to foster sustainable and attractive careers necessitates a holistic vision, crafted by universities themselves. Institutions should be empowered with the autonomy and flexibility to formulate their human resources strategies within a supportive EU and (sub)national framework. This will enable them to implement their long-term institutional strategic goals and deliver on their triple missions of education, research, and societal service, while also reducing barriers to international collaboration.

YERUN calls on all relevant national, European and international stakeholders to take into account these issues when working towards implementing more comprehensive and fairer ways to evaluate academic careers, foster them, and, ultimately, strengthening academia as an attractive place for talent to grow.

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