

POLICY BRIEF:

Providing Career Support to Postdocs – Inspirations and Recommendations from the EU-LIFE Institutes

With the communication of the [new European Research Area \(ERA\)](#), the European Commission has set new ambitious goals for Europe's research and innovation landscape. One of the objectives of the ERA is to boost an effective and creative knowledge market through a strong focus on skills, career development and mobility in research careers. To achieve this goal - and for Europe to hold a leading position in research and innovation - it is of utmost importance to train and promote excellent, motivated researchers at all levels of their career.

The intermediate career position of postdocs represents an especially delicate stage in the researcher's career, with the largest challenges for professional progression. It is also typically at this stage the researcher decides whether aiming to stay in academia or pursue a career outside of academia. In fact, whereas postdocs are highly specialised in their field, they face extreme levels of competition within the academic job market as well as challenges regarding how their skills and expertise are perceived by other sectors. It is therefore essential to provide the appropriate conditions and sufficient support to researchers at this stage in order to secure a successful professional transition to either independent research leadership in academia or equally important and rewarding careers in industry and other sectors.

Within the spirit of sharing practices and learning from each other, the [EU-LIFE Recruitment and Training Working Group](#) developed a hands-on guide for research-performing organisations for the promotion of postdoctoral careers. In it, research-performing organisations will find a set of suggestions on how to support postdoctoral career development. This policy brief summarises the four main sets of recommendations identified in the hands-on guide and extends them to other key stakeholders namely policy makers and funding agencies.

We hope this brief can raise awareness on the challenges of postdoctoral career development and inspire research-performing organisations, funding agencies and other stakeholders to develop and promote the best environment possible for researchers to develop their potential into contributions to ERA and our society.

Promoting early independence for promising postdocs

To help postdocs with a promising track record to develop towards early independence, there is a need for funding opportunities that allow postdocs to become independent project leaders, as well as of an institutional research culture that provides incentives to both postdocs and group leaders to support the early independence of postdocs. We therefore recommend:

- **Policy makers and funding agencies** to enable and fund grant applications with postdocs as project leaders while still not holding a fully independent research position. This includes funds for recruiting additional staff and running costs for the project in addition to the salary for the main (postdoc) applicant.
- **Policy makers, funding agencies and research-performing organisations** to allow postdocs to pause their grants for a fixed period thus giving them a time-out to develop their own research idea (e.g. gathering preliminary data for an independent position application).
- **Research-performing organisations**
 - 1) to create incentives for group leaders to stimulate their postdocs to become more independent. For example, additional credit in the performance evaluation of group

leaders who promote their postdocs as last authors, independent project leaders, co-supervisors of PhD students, etc.

2) to provide incentives for postdocs at an early stage of independence such as salary supplement according to responsibilities, dedicated development track such as mentoring, possibility to obtain additional external funding for their project and networking opportunities.

Providing appropriate contract length and work conditions

The precariousness of research careers is of special concern at the postdoctoral level. Even though the European Framework for Research Careers serves as a framework of good practices, employment contracts are still notoriously short in this career stage, where researchers are also expected to develop innovative and impactful ideas. Likewise, it is key that postdocs have access to working conditions that allow them to further develop their research including access to research infrastructures, technology and a fair and supportive environment. It is also the stage during which researchers often start a family. We therefore recommend:

- **Policy makers and funding organisations** to enforce and support contracts for postdocs whose length reflects the duration of the project, includes time for broader career development and is in accordance with national and EU regulations.
- **Research-performing organisations** to promote tenure-track options for external postdocs as well as development options for permanent staff scientist positions for internal postdoc.
- **Research-performing organisations, as well as policy makers and funding agencies** to promote a work environment that is fair, transparent, inclusive, and ethical with concrete policies and measures that support the relevant aspects of the professional life of all staff (including work-life balance).

Training key skills

Training at the postdoctoral level should focus on providing tools for problem solving and enabling personal and professional development and empowerment, including mentoring, leadership and negotiation skills. In addition, postdocs should be challenged and supported to develop innovative ideas, find their own way and grow through accomplishment and positive institutional reinforcement. We recommend:

- **Policy makers and funding organisations** to support and promote institutional capacity of research-performing organisations for training on skills relevant for research careers within and beyond academia, including formal training programs, inspirational seminars and alumni networks.
- **Research-performing organisations** to establish regular training and mentorship for postdoc researchers; and enforce the vision that these activities are an integral part of postdoctoral activity.

Providing career support for postdocs

The career position of postdocs represents a stage from which many different career paths can be accessed, both within and beyond academia. Hence, postdocs must receive proper guidance to be able to successfully navigate these opportunities. Career development plans for researchers at all career stages in academia are currently integrated as a requirement in many funding calls. There now is a need to monitor implementation of these plans. Furthermore, facilitating networking opportunities across different sectors is a relevant way to provide career support to postdocs and enhance the knowledge of careers outside of



academia; and similarly improve perception among postdocs of the skills and experience valued in other sectors. More specifically, we recommend:

- **Policy makers and funding organisations**
 - 1) to continue promoting networking opportunities and outreach programs for postdocs both within academia and across sectors. This will also further facilitate interconnectivity between academia, industry and the civil society sector.
 - 2) to follow-up on the implementation of the career development plans integrated in the funded research projects.
- **Research-performing organisations**
 - 1) to regularly assess professional performance and discuss career development and opportunities in guidance sessions with the postdoc and provide the appropriate support and training in each individual case;
 - 2) to install mentoring programs for postdocs preferably also including mentors in the industry and civil service sector;
 - 3) to foster a culture in which career paths outside academia are considered as valuable as those in academia. Similarly, to foster a more diverse approach to careers inside the research ecosystem, in which non-group leader career paths are appreciated and recognized (e.g. show-cased in alumni initiatives).

We invite interested readers to consult the EU-LIFE paper “*Best Practices for Postdoc Career Support in the Life Sciences - A Hands-On Guide for Research Institutions*” for further elaboration and more recommendations for research-performing organisations.

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About EU-LIFE

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