

Opinion poll: young scientists' survey gets the dirt on life at the coal face

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No permanent home, no social security, no pension. Most young researchers accept these as facts of life...or do they? A Europe-wide survey is posing some interesting questions and finding some important answers.

Are Europe's young researchers satisfied with their training conditions? Do they feel well prepared for their future professional life in a European context? What does the younger generation of scientists think of European policy in the areas of research and higher education?



These and similar questions are the subject of a survey set up by a working group comprising members of three major European young scientists' associations: the Marie Curie Fellowship Association, Eurodoc and PI-net.

The survey is a pilot study aimed at getting an overview of the current situation. It covers a multitude of areas: from the quality of PhD training, moving on to mobility issues, all the way to some burning science policy questions. The idea to conduct the survey came during preparations for the recent Euroscience conference on *New science- and technology-based professions in Europe* (see *Young scientists need to develop new skills for new jobs* in *The ELSO Gazette*, issue 12), and a selection of interim results was presented at this conference last November.

Given the large variety of subjects it touches upon, the survey does not claim to have the questions to all answers – the idea is rather to establish a base for more in-depth studies on specific aspects at a later stage.

Inertia

So far, more than 2,200 young scientists from all over Europe have responded to the questionnaire.

The bulk of the respondents are PhD students or recent PhDs. Consequently, most of the replies – about 76% – came from people who are currently working in the public research sector and who believe that they will stay there for some time to come. When asked where they see themselves five years from now, 72% of those working in public research stated that this is where they see their immediate future. Only 9.5% indicated that they might move to a research job in the private sector, and about 10.5% thought they might quit research altogether. By contrast, 25% of those in private research (about 7% of the total respondents) think that they will move to a public research institution within the next five years.

But is there room in Europe's universities and public research centres for all these young scientists, especially at a time when public money is getting tight? Do the responses reflect a certain naivety and lack of realism? Not necessarily. Another question in the survey asked whether the respondents could imagine a change of professional direction, for example from academia to industry or from research to research

The Eurodoc logo consists of the word 'eurodoc' in a lowercase, sans-serif font, with 'euro' in blue and 'doc' in red. It is set against a light blue rectangular background.

management. Surprisingly, some 55% of those currently engaged in public research replied to this question with a strong "yes", while only 20% denied such a possibility. For researchers in the private sector the numbers were 62% and 17% respectively. So, in principle, young people are flexible and prepared to try out something new – if the need arises. However, to most of them this need does not seem to be obvious.

One reason for the relative 'inertia' of young researchers could also be that it is not how to make the quantum leap from academia to industry, business or administration: only 52% feel that their university education has adequately prepared them for their professional life, 37% have

their doubts and 10% are convinced that this is not the case. So what are the universities doing wrong?

On a scale ranging from 0 (extremely poor) to 5 (excellent), PhD supervisors earned themselves an average grade of 3.4 for their scientific guidance, which shows some room for improvement. This grade drops to a meagre 2.4 when it comes to counselling on career development: many supervisors still believe that their responsibilities towards their students lie purely in the scientific domain. But if supervisors don't help their students to plan their professional careers, then often there is no one else to turn to.



On a more structural level, there is a clear demand for more alternative training opportunities. Only 31% of respondents spent some time on an internship during their

PhD, half of these on their own initiative. Of those who didn't, less than 8% said that they would not have been interested in such an option.

Similar remarks apply to courses on transferable skills (like presentation techniques, project management, etc.). Here more than 50% replied that they did not have the opportunity for such training, and less than 4% of these showed no interest in such offers.

Mobility

The researcher's profession has always been closely associated with mobility. Going abroad for a limited but substantial period of time is a natural option for most young researchers. The destination is not really an issue here – many people (46%) said they would be willing to go just about anywhere for a temporary placement. Among the rest, there was a clear preference to stay within Europe (32%). North America was the option of choice for 11% only. When it comes to a permanent position, the numbers change: only 19% would be willing to take a position virtually anywhere, 16% could imagine moving permanently to North America, whereas 66% would accept a permanent job in another European country.

Unfortunately, mobile researchers still have to struggle with a lot of problems and disadvantages when moving to another country. Questions of social security such as eligibility for benefits and transferability of rights are important issues that even within the European Union (EU) haven't been resolved in a satisfactory way. The respondents in

the survey attached rather high importance to these problems, which increased with progress in their careers, and the vast majority would not accept to be worse off than nationals of the host country.

With regard to other administrative obstacles to mobility, such as the paperwork related to visas, work and residency permits, a clear majority of 70% demanded preferential treatment of researchers compared to other members of the mobile work force. Only slightly more than 12% expressed their disagreement with such a special treatment. 54% of the respondents went even further – they would like to see a special legal status for European researchers, while 22% didn't think that this was a good idea.

The respondents from the central and eastern European countries agreed even more vehemently with this proposal. Of the Romanian respondents, for example, 86% asked for preferential treatment of researchers with regard to administrative questions of mobility, and 65% would like to see a special legal status for European researchers.

These results are hardly surprising to anybody who knows how many administrative hurdles mobile researchers from the candidate countries have to leap. It is but a small consolation that many (but not all) of these difficulties will disappear when they join the EU.

The survey will run until the end of March this year, by when it hopes to have gathered responses from at least 3000 scientists. The organizers will then draw up a detailed report that will be sent to the European Commission, the European Science Foundation and other national and international science policy makers and advisers.

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Links

Home page of the survey of young scientists
http://www.mariecurie.org/surveys/YS_survey/

Marie Curie Fellowship Association
<http://www.mariecurie.org/>

Eurodoc
<http://www.eurodoc.net/>

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