

Recommendations from MCFA Members regarding the pan-European Researcher's Mobility Portal

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I. General Set-up of the Portal

We very much support the idea of setting up a portal as proposed in parallel to a network of national mobility centers. This is an excellent initiative which has long been overdue. It is a great chance to improve the situation of (mobile) researchers in Europe, and great care should be taken to implement the project in the best possible way, in order to make the best use of this unique opportunity.

We welcome the division of the portal into two parts, the first one providing information on grants, fellowships, jobs etc., practical information about moving to and living in a foreign country, as well as policy issues on national and European level. This provision of factual information should then be supported by a Discussion Area, the second part of the portal, where all stakeholders can interact in an informal manner (as already planned). The mobility centers on national level will play a vital role by providing individualised practical advice to mobile researchers. Their importance cannot be overestimated.

In our opinion, the portal should cover the whole of Europe as far as possible, including all associated states. Especially the part about jobs and grants should also be open for offers from other countries, in particular North America and Japan, although the main emphasis should be on Europe.

We feel that in order to make the portal the standard source of information for mobile researchers in

Europe, the first thing that needs to be done is to give it a good brand name. The term "pan-European Researcher's Mobility Portal" is simply too long and not catchy enough. The portal should also have its own domain name. A catchy name that also serves as the internet address would be perfect.

In what follows we would like to make a few comments regarding more concrete aspects of the portal. These are based to a large extent on the PowerPoint presentation file „movie.ppt“ and similar sources, while almost none of the contributors has actually seen the preliminary version of the portal. In order to be able to give more detailed feedback, online access to the portal will be indispensable. We hope to be given the chance to contribute further to the development of the portal as one of the trial user groups.

It should also be noted that the list that we give includes many items that it would be nice to have, but that do not have top priority. We include them nonetheless in order to make this document as complete as possible. It should be clear from the formulations and the ordering which aspects we consider to be the most important ones.

II. Information on Grants, Fellowships, Job Offers and similar

(a) Grants and Fellowships

- The EU fellowship programmes should be presented in a clear and structured way, so that even a newcomer can understand immediately how they work (roughly). EU funded projects that offer fellowships should be required to advertise their positions on the portal.
- The information on grants and fellowships should cover all scientific areas and all stages of a researcher's career. In particular, it should include information on grants for junior and senior researchers, it should cover fellowships in industry, business, and academia, and it should include natural sciences as well as social sciences and humanities.
- Information should be available not only on grants for medium and long term research stays, but also for short term exploratory visits. As one contributor put it, "the decision to become 'transnationally mobile' is often a graduated one, i.e. it requires exploratory visits. Human beings do not 'click and go' in real life."
- There should also be information available on travel grants - many researchers especially at the start of their careers have no funds for scientific travel, even though they may have a multi-year contract at a university or research institution. The same applies to financial support for publications.
- Conditions and eligibility criteria should be given in simple and transparent terms. The information should be organised in a standardised way, so that the user can easily find the information that she or he finds particularly important. All offers should include a short description of the host institution and the research team. They should also include information on potential scientific and career benefits. There should always be given a contact person from whom one might obtain further details.
- The search mechanism should allow to enter criteria like age, nationality, gender or sector. A male researcher from the UK at the age of 40 who is looking for a research grant in academia will have little interest in grants in industry, grants that are for French citizens only, grants that have an age limit of 35, or grants that are reserved for women scientists.

- It would be helpful to know how many fellowships or grants of a certain type are actually available and what is the success rate.

(b) Jobs and Permanent Positions

- The information on jobs and permanent positions should of course also cover all scientific areas and all career stages. In particular, it should include job offers in the academic system, in industry, business, public administration (including the European Commission and national government agencies) and NGOs.
- The requirements for a particular job should be clearly stated (language skills, recognition of foreign titles and diplomas, etc.). As far as possible, information on career advancement possibilities should be provided. The information should be organised in a standardised way.
- A CV database should be connected to the portal (as already planned).
- Apart from job offers that are directly submitted to the portal by universities, companies etc., the portal should be linked to national and international open jobs databases (it seems that this is already being implemented).
- Employment statistics and trends specifically for the sectors involving science and research could provide an aid for decision making.

(c) Start-ups

- There should be a section with information for scientists starting-up their own business. This should include practical help as well as information on financial support available (tax relief etc.)
- A facility to match up science entrepreneurs and venture capitalists could be useful.

(d) General Comments related to Professional Opportunities

- Regarding the academic sector, it would be very helpful to have a general overview over the academic system in each country, i.e. what are the different career stages (assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, lecturer, senior lecturer, chargé de recherche, directeur de recherche, ...), whether there is something like a "habilitation" or similar, how the recruitment process works (continuous recruitment whenever a position becomes vacant as in Germany, or national recruitment sessions once a year as in France, existence of the "qualification" in France etc). Relatively short "fact sheets" could be supplemented by appropriate links to the web pages of the national ministries for education and research or similar.
- There should be a section with information on the procedure for the recognition of foreign academic titles, covering both the professional recognition and the academic recognition, where applicable (as in Spain for example). This will be of particular importance for academic titles obtained in the eastern European countries where the system of academic degrees differs quite a bit from that of western Europe and where the recognition procedure is not regulated by Community law. Apart from academic titles, the recognition of professional qualifications (for example for medical or legal professions) should also be treated, in particular with a view towards the situation of accompanying family members.
- Summary reports and project descriptions of EU-funded projects should be accessible

through the portal. The portal could also include an e-prints archive for publications that come out of EU-funded projects, or a link to such an archive if already existant.

- A partner search facility for scientists looking for expertise in a specific area could enhance international collaboration.
- There should also be a section with conference announcements, especially if they are of an interdisciplinary nature or related to European research policy.
- The portal should also provide information on interdisciplinary training courses, training opportunities in research management and transferable skills, internships for scientists looking for a career change, etc.
- A section with a tutorial on grant and job applications in Europe could be helpful (a good job application in Spain would not necessarily be considered good in Germany and vice versa).
- There should be a section with information specifically tailored for women to improve their career chances. This should also include a link list to national and international organisations of women researchers and other sources of information related to "women in science" and gender issues.

III. Practical Information

The portal should contain information on the most important issues like:

- Entry requirements (visa, work permits, for the researcher and accompanying family members). This should include some information on the time it usually takes to obtain the necessary documents.
- Taxation. This should include information on double taxation agreements, special treatment of university teachers and researchers, short term visitors etc. It should also include information on how and when to submit the tax declaration (if possible, online), and whether any special steps need to be taken when leaving the country (for example, submit a preliminary tax declaration and ask for a "quitus fiscal" in the case of France). Regional differences should be taken into account (for example, the tax system in Schottland seems to be different from the one in England).
- The health insurance system. This should include the level of coverage, typical waiting times, comparisons between the state system and the private system (where applicable), information on possibilities for supplementary coverage. Sometimes there are special schemes for foreigners not staying in the country longer than a certain amount of time. Information on such schemes should be included as well.
- The old age pension system. An explanation should be given of the different schemes existing in parallel, as for instance in France (CNAV plus another compulsory insurance which depends on the sector of employment). Questions of portability and transferability should be covered, and information provided on what needs to be done upon leaving the country.
- Unemployment insurance scheme. Conditions for the acquisition of rights and the portability should be treated. In some cases, the national unemployment insurance system does not apply. Information on what to do in such cases should also be included (e.g. this is the case in France for persons directly employed by the Universities on a temporary contract - this applies to many Marie Curie fellows).
- A section about the general rights and the status of employees in the different countries would be good (e.g. for how long one can be employed on temporary contracts, what happens if this duration is exceeded etc.).
- Special financial support available for researchers with family (for example, "allocations

familiales" in France). The conditions for eligibility as well as the procedure to obtain this support should be clearly stated. The same for other kinds of support and reductions for families.

- Information on schooling and child care. A general overview over the education system of each country (or region, where there are regional differences) would be useful. Information on the requirements for admission in schools and childcare centres, deadlines and typical costs should also be available.
- Information on the legal status of unmarried couples and homosexual partnerships. This should include information regarding the recognition of "registered partnerships" from one country in another.
- Information on how to exert one's voting rights in the foreign country. This includes information on the documents that need to be presented and the deadlines for inscription into the electoral register.
- Information on how to bring a car into the host country, registration and insurance requirements, information on the validity of the driving license.
- A list of embassies and consulates in the host country should be supplied.

It might be useful to organise this information in the form of a grid, so that the user enters the country she or he is coming from as well as the country the person is moving to, and then obtains the information that applies exactly to her or his situation.

In addition to these points that are of a rather general nature, the portal should also supply information on the following questions related to the daily life of the researcher and her or his family:

- How to open a bank account before arrival in the country. This is an important point as it is often difficult to open a bank account before having moved to the new country and at least partially having settled in (one often needs a work contract or a rental agreement in order to open a bank account). The Kastler foundation in France has done a great job in this respect: they have established an agreement with the Société Générale so that foreign researchers applying for a bank account through the Kastler foundation can have this account fully operational by the time of arrival. This idea could be copied by the national mobility centres.
- Information on how to find accommodation, links to accommodation services. Information on the requirements needed to fulfil in order to obtain accommodation (for example in France, a person newly arriving in the country will usually need a guarantor who will pay the rent if for some reason the researcher cannot pay it herself or himself). An indication of the costs involved if searching for accommodation through an agency as well as an indication of the average cost of housing would be useful, also a glossary of the terminology usually employed in housing adverts. Finally, some information as to where it is save to live or not, for the big cities, could be helpful.
- An indication of the level of living expenses and usual salaries - a list of the values of common goods might be a good idea.
- How to obtain a telephone line and internet access; what are the possible providers.
- Information on and links to associations for the protection of consumers' rights, associations of tenants, associations of tax payers etc. who give practical advice on many kinds of problems.
- A list of physicians who speak a particular foreign language.
- Information on language courses both online and offline.
- Online dictionaries and online translation services.
- Travel information (train and coach travel at least) and maps of major cities; some general information on the history and the social and political background of each country.

- Links to specialised mailing lists for expatriots.
- Information on the work culture in the country. Other cultural peculiarities.

In order to supply the best possible information on the above points, the user should be asked to enter a certain amount of information (nationality, country of origin, country/region/city of destination) and then be directed towards a page containing tailor-made information. Such a service is available in France through "France Contact", but unfortunately the access to this service is password protected and requires the user to be registered. If such tailor-made information is going to be made available through the portal, it should be freely accessible. In particular, there should be a list of what needs to be done when moving to the host country, what needs to be done when leaving again.

For those researchers who do not have easy online access, it might be a good idea to produce the output of the query in the form of a fact book that can be downloaded and then consulted offline. In this case it is essential that the date of creation of the fact book is clearly indicated.

IV. European Science and Research Policy

This section should contain real-time information on developments in the science and research (and funding) policies of the different countries and on European level. Many researchers, especially the younger ones, do not have a very high level of political awareness when it comes to questions of science policy, so a section giving a well-structured and transparent overview could be really useful to increase the interest in the topic.

Links to sources of general information on the European Union and its historic development might also be a good idea to put things into perspective.

V. Discussion Area

The discussion area should serve all types of users of the portal: researchers and their families who might be looking for contacts in their future host city; university administrators who want to exchange experiences on administrative issues related to foreign researchers at their institution, project coordinators who need some specialised outside expertise, policy makers who want some feedback on specific questions related to science policy, etc. The discussion area should be searchable by key word.

The discussion area has to be moderated and animated. It could contain case studies from different institutions where researchers relate their experiences and give insider hints on all aspects of their stay. It should be made clear that these experiences are of a completely subjective nature. One could also think of a standardised questionnaire that researchers who have stayed at a particular institution could be asked to fill in (similar to the questionnaire that Marie Curie fellows have to fill in at the end of their fellowship). These questionnaires could then be used in order to arrive at a point system indicating the level of satisfaction with the treatment received during the stay at the particular institution. The results should be transmitted to the institutions on a regular basis. This could be a good means to exert some gentle pressure on the administration of the host institutions to improve their treatment of invited researchers.

The discussion area could also include a part where mobile researchers can look for a flat exchange, or simply look for or offer accommodation. It could also be a forum to sell furniture or electrical appliances that may be too bulky to move with the researcher to her or his new location.

VI. Language of the Portal

During the pilot phase it seems advisable to supply the basic information in English only. This way it is easier to update and validate. Once the pilot phase comes to an end, more languages could be introduced. For example, the information relating to France should then also be available in French which would make it more easily accessible to the people working in the French administration. However, the most important thing is that the information is always up-to-date, and that the information in a specific section is independent of the language chosen. It should be indicated on the top of the page which languages are available (this seems to be already implemented).

Where links to sites in languages other than English are given, the language of the linked page should be clearly indicated at the link. In general, all organisations providing information to the portal should be encouraged to supply both a version in the local language and in English.

VII. Securing the Quality of the Information provided on the Portal

In order to make sure that the information on the portal is constantly updated and improved, there should be a dedicated quality monitoring team. All pages of the portal should be dated, and there should be an error button on each page leading to a structured error reporting form where the field "what page are you referring to" is automatically filled in if the user goes through that link. These error messages should be directly transmitted both to the quality monitoring team and to the original supplier of the information. It is then the role of the monitoring team to make sure that the information is corrected (if necessary) as quickly as possible.

For the country specific information, it would probably make sense to have a person from the bridgehead mobility centre take on the role of the monitor.

As far as job offers are concerned, information providers should have the possibility to delete offers as soon as the positions have been filled. It should also be possible to assign an expiration date to certain pages after which they will be automatically deleted. This may be useful for grant opportunities that come with a fixed deadline. In general, information providers should be required to confirm or update their information in regular intervals, otherwise the information will be deleted (after an automatic warning message).

Another way to make sure that the information provided is the information needed by the mobile researcher community could be a rating system. I.e. the users are invited to give points for the information content and the presentation of the information. More constructive and extensive feedback on the functionality of the portal should be provided through a structured feedback form. As an incentive for giving feedback (especially at the beginning), the users providing feedback could take part in a monthly draw in which they could win a book about a chosen country, a CD with typical music from a chosen country or similar. One could also implement a system where feedback that is actually used to improve the site is remunerated with a certain number of bonus points which can be collected and exchanged for "gifts", whose value should however not be very

high and mainly symbolic.

One could also think of creating an independent monitoring group that presents a report in regular intervals (perhaps every three months). Such monitors (or the organisations providing them) should get a certain financial compensation for their work. The MCFA could possibly provide such a monitoring group.

VIII. Obtaining the Information to be displayed on the Portal

Regarding the section on open jobs and grants in academia, research institutions, universities and individual research departments within the universities should be approached directly. They should be encouraged to advertise their open positions on the portal, and also to place a link to it on their web pages. Just approaching the personnel office of the universities will not be enough, since many positions especially on doctoral or postdoctoral level within research projects are often decided on completely autonomously by the departments.

All positions within EU funded projects should be posted on the portal by default. Agreements should be made with major national organisations like Max-Planck-Gesellschaft and similar so that they also post their positions on the portal by default.

Regarding job openings in industry and business, especially in SMEs, a targeted information campaign should be launched in cooperation with national ministries. The portal should also be presented at career events, where it would be promoted to young researchers and to industry/business at the same time. It would be particularly desirable if these enterprises did not only post open jobs, but also provided feedback on the usefulness of the portal and ways to improve it.

As an incentive for continuous feedback from both sectors, those companies or research institutions making particularly useful contributions could be invited to present themselves in somewhat more detail in a section "enterprise of the week/month" or "featured institution".

During the pilot phase organisations like MCFA, Eurodoc, EARMA, etc. should be asked to propose trial user groups that not only evaluate the information available, but also contribute with new ideas and links to existing sources of information.

IX. Other Comments on the Portal

It should be made absolutely sure that the entire content of the portal is accessible to all potential users. That means: the portal has to run on all platforms (there's hardly anything more annoying than webpages that can only be accessed under Windows), there should be no applications that need special plug-ins (shockwave flash etc.), and it should be compatible with all common browsers (including older versions). It should also be kept in mind that internet access is not equally fast and easily available in all parts of Europe.

The site should be kept as simple as possible in order to facilitate surfing, the interface should be kept light and transparent. Special effort should be invested in the search mechanism of the portal, which should be neither too vague nor too restrictive in order to give valuable results. The whole

content of the site should also be accessible to independent search engines; this will actually contribute to the dissemination of the information.

There needs to be a good and extensive FAQ section in order to avoid that the people taking care of the feedback get drowned under standard questions.

X. The Mobility Centers

The mobility centres play a very important role, because it is them who are in direct contact with the researchers and are supposed to give individual help and provide tailor-made solutions. This is a big responsibility - if the mobility centres do not have the resources or the training to provide answers within a relatively short time (48 hours seems reasonable), then the whole idea of the mobility centres and the portal will lose credibility. Therefore it appears essential that the mobility centres be allocated the necessary resources, and this not only during an initial start-up phase.