Impact Outlook

- 'A PhD no longer guarantees an academic position. A PhD is becoming more and more a stepping stone to a career outside academia'
- 'Through our national associations, we are directly and quickly able to assess the main issues and needs of over a million early-career researchers in Europe'

A balancing act

President Gareth O'Neill and General Board Member Emanuele Storti elucidate the ways in which the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc) is seeking to revolutionise the career development of early-career researchers

Could you introduce the term 'intersectoral mobility', and explain why it is such an important topic among early-career researchers (ECRs)?

GO: The term 'intersectoral mobility' refers to the movement of researchers between academia and the public/private sector (henceforth 'industry'). Within an academic context, the term is generally used for unidirectional movement: from academia to industry. Intersectoral mobility is important for ECRs as the majority of doctoral candidates and junior researchers across Europe must find employment in industry due to the relatively low stay rates in academia – yet doctoral and even postdoctoral training is geared towards a career in academia.

What is the current situation regarding doctoral careers in Europe? How has this changed in recent years?

GO: With the steadily increasing number of doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers in Europe, a PhD no longer guarantees an academic position. A PhD is becoming more and more a stepping stone to a career outside academia. The reason for this increase is clear: Europe is aiming to be a world leader in research and innovation as well as aiming to increase the level of education and scientific awareness in general society. Increasing the number of PhD holders, the majority of whom inevitably end up in industry, achieves both of these aims. This situation has been cynically termed 'the PhD factory' in the media and highlights the career expectation mismanagement from both academic institutions and ECRs themselves.

ES: In recent years, traditional structured careers in academia for PhD holders have indeed undergone drastic changes in Europe, as has the labour market in general. Today, junior researchers are in a weakened and vulnerable position in the research community. For many of them, it has become increasingly common to have positions that are precarious in terms of the short duration of contracts, working conditions and lack of long-term prospects. It is also common for junior researchers to face repeated periods of unemployment. Furthermore, many of them face non-linear career paths, for instance due to intersectoral mobility, where they may move to industry and potentially return to academia. The added value of such career paths is rarely acknowledged in employment and promotion at universities, making non-standard career profiles an obstacle for the modern research career. A focus on career development for junior researchers and recognition of non-standard careers is badly needed.

What are some of the barriers to career development and progressing into a non-academic field? How does Eurodoc hope to overcome these issues?

GO: One clear barrier is that most ECRs want and expect to stay in academia. Statistically speaking, this is simply not possible. Academic institutions need to be more explicit about the stay rates in academia and ECRs need to accept this fact and prepare for a possible career in industry. A second barrier is that many academic institutions do not offer adequate training for a career in industry. ECRs need practical transferable skills courses such as communication, project management, leadership, collaborating,

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networking and entrepreneurship. A third crucial barrier is that ECRs often do not come into contact with industry during their research projects and thus have no industry contacts or experience. Collaborative projects, career and networking events and paid temporary internships in industry should be more the norm at academic institutions to support their ECRs' careers.

ES: Eurodoc periodically investigates the career development and employment perspectives of ECRs in Europe through studies conducted by our Working Group (WG) on Employment & Careers and our WG on Mobility. We also carry out surveys among our national association members and ECRs from across Europe, which show that most ECRs are unsure of their future career options and lack adequate career development support. Our efforts are therefore focused, on the one side, on making ECRs more aware of their employment chances in academia and the benefits of non-academic careers. On the other side, we engage in constant dialogue with all major European stakeholders in higher education and research, where we push for the development of national and European frameworks for the career support of ECRs that focus on the broader labour market.

How are you collaborating with academia and industry to improve access to additional training for ECRs?

GO: We collaborate on a European level with academic institutions through our partnership with the European University Association, League of European Research Universities, Guild of European Research Intensive Universities, and Young European Research Universities Network. We also collaborate on a national level with academic institutions via our individual national association members who are actively engaged in their respective countries. With respect to industry, we are now looking into ways to engage more with the public/private sector via collaboration with EURAXESS and Business Europe.

How are you proposing to develop best practices and policy advice for all major European stakeholders?

ES: By being in constant contact with the European community of ECRs through our national associations, we are directly and quickly able to assess the main issues and needs of over a million ECRs in Europe. Eurodoc develops focused policy on issues related to higher education and research thanks to this community, by means of specific WGs that welcome contributions from interested ECRs, national delegates and external experts. To support these positions, we often conduct qualitative and quantitative analyses in the form of national and European surveys. Our most interesting findings are shared with our institutional partners and provide the basis to further discuss and develop possible solutions to issues for ECRs.

What do you believe the key issues will be for career development for ECRs in the coming five years? How will Eurodoc seek to be a part of this conversation and find solutions?

GO: Outside the key problems we have already raised, I think fundamental issues for ECRs, and researchers in general, will be the implementation of Open Science and the increasing stress and mental health problems in academia. Both are tied to career development. Open Science will entail a whole new way of conducting research and sharing research data and results. This transition will necessarily involve training researchers for the various open science practices such as open access, open data, and citizen science. These skills must simultaneously be relevant for both academia and industry to embrace the reality of open science being a societal shift and a growing number of researchers moving to industry. Following on from this, an increase in skills training and tasks related to research will inevitably lead to an increase in work stress. We know from studies that researchers are significantly stressed and suffer from mental health issues. A balanced system that takes the workload and work-life balance of researchers into account is absolutely crucial. Eurodoc will continue to raise awareness and highlight these issues under ECRs, with all of our main stakeholders, and in the media. The ivory tower must not only become accountable externally to general society but also internally to the researchers who maintain the system.