Reducing the precarity of researchers’ careers

Prof. Bert Overlaet, KU Leuven, League of European Research Universities
OECD meeting, October 7, 2019

The European researchers’ career framework

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<th>R1</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>R3</th>
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<td>Recognized researcher</td>
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<td>Leading researcher</td>
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The road to a permanent position as professor may be long and winding

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The PhD is a stepping stone for diversity of careers

Delivering talent: Careers of researchers inside and outside academia

LERU position paper
June 2018
The employability of doctorate holders

- Exit survey: two out of three doctors have a job when leaving university
- More than half of the Belgian doctors hold positions for which a PhD is required
- Employed as researcher: 33% sciences, 22% engineering, 17% biomedical, 12% social sciences, 8% humanities
- Salary bonus for doctorate holders
  - Humanities: +13.1%
  - Biomedical Sciences: +9.0%
  - Science & technology: +6.6%

Employment rate 2016, aged 25-64

- Doctorate holders: 92.6%
- Highly educated: 90%
- Population Flanders: 80%

The first phase is not the issue

- Academic careers are and should be an exception for PhD holders
  - this is well understood by most of the PhD candidates
  - employment perspectives are excellent for PhD graduates
  - precarious employment conditions are not exceptional at the start of any career
- Both universities and society profit from this practice
  - inflow of people with research training is important for a knowledge economy
  - although it demands a lot of effort to train all these young people, it also brings advantages to universities
What about postdocs?

- Different temporary positions:
  - fellowships that are personal, i.e. granted to the researcher (e.g. MC)
  - fixed term contracts that are based on research money from the PI
- Some countries provide permanent positions in phase R2 and R3
  - e.g. France (maître de conférence), The Netherlands (Universiteitsdocent)
  - they have no full professor status and do not hold a “ius promovendi”
  - progress to full professorship is as limited as in other countries
  - a large proportion of these permanent positions is as frustrated as their colleagues with temporary contracts in other countries
- Career perspective may be more important than the precariousness of the contract

The approach of LERU universities

- LERU universities address the phase R2 and R3 career issue in two ways
  1. focus on extensive training and guidance
  2. decide on career orientation earlier in the career
- These initiatives are not exclusive to LERU universities, in some cases they were developed in a partnership with (local) government or with other HEI
1. Focus on training and career guidance

- The instruments and practices developed at the doctoral schools are expanded to postdocs and Tenure Track professors
- This includes a strong focus on personal development
  - transferable skills (including leadership training)
  - personal development programs (PDP), based on models such as Vitae
  - mentoring program for Tenure Track professors (R3)
- The researcher is supported by a Career Center, where (s)he finds individual and collective career guidance
  - regular career events, with testimonies from different external careers
  - a job platform, in collaboration with research intensive industry

2. Early career orientation

- Researchers tend to stay in their precarious employment situation, without considering alternatives: they should be guided much earlier in their careers
- The introduction of Tenure Track positions has moved our selection for academic careers forward in time
- Within KU Leuven, we created the possibility of permanent research management positions for research groups with a substantial external research funding program
- Also within KU Leuven, researchers have to decide about their further career
  - 6 years after their PhD or when they approach the age of 35
  - from that moment on, further extension of precarious temporary contracts is refused unless there is a perspective for future employment at the university
Challenges

- We believe that universities can do a lot to improve the career perspectives of young researchers, without creating massively extra permanent positions
- We believe that the initiatives we take towards career guidance provide a win for
  - the researchers, who improve their skills and enlarge their career perspectives
  - the university, as it becomes more attractive as an employer
  - society, who receives the talent and experience of the researchers
  - science, that benefits from increased mobility

However, …

- We see some challenges relating to government and funders’ policies

1. autonomy
2. administrative complexity
3. precarious funding
1. Autonomy of universities

• Investing in career guidance and improving the career perspectives of your researchers requires sufficient autonomy for the university to develop its policies and make its decisions
• In several countries (e.g. Italy, Spain, France,…) this is still an issue, as university career decisions are often taken on a centralized country level
• Funders also tend to impose more rules, reducing flexibility for research groups and universities

2. Administrative complexity

• In spite of all efforts, universities increasingly experience difficulties and complexities to obtain working permits and long term visa for international researchers
• This creates additional insecurity for young mobile researchers
• Also regulations in the fiscal or social security domain are so complex that universities have difficulties to comply
3. Precarious funding

- Both direct and indirect costs of our efforts for career development or transferable skills training are rejected by most research funders
- This leads to a paradox for the universities

**Government and funders de facto refuse to fund the policies they advocate or even impose**

- Well known examples are OTM-R, HRS4R, Open Science (e.g. Plan S)
- Universities risk to get squeezed between the (legitimate) expectations of its researchers and the reluctance of governments to support their own policies

Conclusion

- LERU universities strongly invest in improving career perspectives for young researchers, examples are available in our publications
- The focus is not on precarity of the contract itself, but on development of the researcher, employability and ownership of one’s own career
- Good career practices come with a cost, but who is going to pay for it?
  - basic government funding is in most countries decreasing or at least not increasing
  - research funding is available, but it is competitive and uncertain and rules become more restrictive
- So governments, please, put your money where your mouth is…