

## Defining '*Junior Researchers*' and Challenges they Face

Different terms are used for researchers who have received their PhD but have not yet reached senior rank. Accordingly, this group of researchers is often defined differently by different institutions and stakeholders. Depending on how the group is defined, other implications for specific needs and challenges may follow.

First, this paper aims at defining *Junior Researcher* as the term that describes one of Eurodoc's target groups. Second, it highlights the overlaps with and distinctions from other commonly used terms. Finally, it outlines some important challenges this group of researchers is facing.

### Definition *Junior Researchers*

*Junior Researcher* is a term coined by Eurodoc to refer to people who have been **awarded a doctoral degree** and are **engaged in a temporary and defined period of advanced, not yet fully independent research**, either in academia, in the public or in the private sector.

Eurodoc believes that there should be transparent and achievable career paths for *Junior Researchers* with reasonable time intervals between career steps. However, to give an exact time frame in which a person should be considered a *Junior Researcher* after the conferment of a doctorate is neither possible nor desirable. First, it would ignore the reality of many researchers given the diversity of career structures and labour markets for researchers that exist across Europe. Second, any restriction to a determinate time frame does neither take into account breaks or stretched career paths (for example due to family tasks, other private obligations, or lack of employment opportunities), nor does it

allow for any non-linear career steps (e.g., leaving time for researchers to gain experiences in the private sector or to spend time with their family).

Therefore, we only provide a broad definition of *Junior Researchers* that considers the diversity of experiences, backgrounds and career paths is useful to help retaining and resuming talented people in research.

The status as *Junior Researcher* ends with the appointment of a permanent position as fully independent researcher or with a complete and ultimate disengagement from research.

## Overlaps with and distinction from similar terms

The European Charter & Code<sup>1</sup> distinguishes Early-Stage Researchers (ESRs) from *Experienced Researchers*. The latter are (in short) defined as researchers who hold a doctoral degree or four years of research experience.

A similar definition is found in the European Framework for Research Careers for *R2 Recognised Researcher*: PhD holders or equivalent who are not yet fully independent.<sup>2</sup>

Further, *postdoc* is a popular term to denominate researchers in their first years after their doctoral degree. However, it is most often used to refer to researchers on a fixed term contract. It also tends to be used at universities only and rarely in other research institutes in the public and private sector.

## Major challenges of *Junior Researchers*

In the following, we want to point briefly to major challenges that *Junior Researchers* typically encounter nowadays. A detailed discussion of these challenges has been and/or will be provided elsewhere<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers: “Experienced Researchers are defined as researchers having at least four years of research experience (full-time equivalent) since gaining a university diploma giving them access to doctoral studies, in the country in which the degree/diploma was obtained or researchers already in possession of a doctoral degree, regardless of the time taken to acquire it”; reference: European Commission, 2005; <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter>, access date: 08.07.2017

<sup>2</sup> Reference: European Commission, 2011; [https://cdn5.euraxess.org/sites/default/files/policy\\_library/towards\\_a\\_european\\_framework\\_for\\_research\\_careers\\_final.pdf](https://cdn5.euraxess.org/sites/default/files/policy_library/towards_a_european_framework_for_research_careers_final.pdf), access date: 08.07.2017

<sup>3</sup> For example, see the review included here: Science Europe. (2016). *Postdoctoral Funding Schemes in Europe: Survey Report*. Retrieved from Brussels: <https://www.scienceeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/20160922-Survey-Postdocs-Final.pdf>

❖ Precariousness or even lack of employment:

For *Junior Researchers* throughout Europe it is increasingly common to get stuck in continuous **fixed-term**, precarious positions. Additionally, many hold only **short-term** contracts, receive **stipends** (which do often not include social security benefits) or have to deal with repeated periods of unemployment. This employment pattern suggests an increase in **institutional abuse of temporary contracts**, leaving *Junior Researchers* in a weakened position in the research community due to their job insecurity.

❖ Inappropriate and unattractive working conditions:

Looking at working conditions, *Junior Researchers* can be confronted with a **lack of access to research infrastructure** and an **insufficient integration in existing networks** at the institution they are working. Further, **inequality of opportunities for men and women** is still a reality in most research and HE institutions, especially when it comes to advanced research positions. Finally, the demand for **career planning security** is very high among *Junior Researchers* given the employment conditions mentioned above, but rarely met appropriately by research and HE institutions.

❖ Insufficient career development support:

While career development is a crucial matter to *Junior Researchers*, they often miss sufficient according offers at their work place like **mentoring** or **further training opportunities**. In relation to the above mentioned career planning but also to career development activities, honest but promoting **feedback regarding career prospects** is a necessary support activity. As a prerequisite for these support activities to become fruitful, **transparent, realistic and fair recruitment criteria** need to be a standard throughout Europe.

❖ Non-standard career paths:

The **imbalance of career demands and private needs** (e.g. family tasks and caring work vs. mobility demands and job insecurity, dual career couples<sup>4</sup>) stays a constant challenge for *Junior Researchers*.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Eurodoc's policy paper on „Dual Career Opportunities for Doctoral Candidates and Early Career Researchers“, 2014:

<http://www.eurodoc.net/sites/default/files/attachments/2017/133/eurodocdualcareerservices.pdf>

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Many have already been confronted with this challenge during the doctorate. Additionally, **non-standard career paths are rarely acknowledged for promotion**, making variable career profiles and permeable career paths an obstacle for a research career. Further, those many *Junior Researchers* with the non-standard career paths do often (structurally or informally) suffer from a **lack of institutional acknowledgement and/or voice** (e.g. lack of representation in university structures).

❖ Barriers to mobility:

While mobility is often a requirement for *Junior Researchers* to follow a research career, the **diverse labour markets and HE systems** as well as **career structures across Europe** pose a barrier to mobility that is still difficult to overcome. The European research market is characterized by **diverse recruitment practices and policies** and huge **differences between national pension and social security systems**, leaving a disproportionate part of the (financial and other) mobility costs with the individual researcher. This includes costs in terms of **life-domain-balance issues caused by mobility**. However, for those moving between countries, **international mobility is not always being rewarded**.

As for intersectoral mobility, **societal ignorance of academic merits**, the value of the doctorate and research skills can be an obstacle. Finally, a **return to academia after working in other sectors** is a challenge faced by *Junior Researchers* willing to move between academia and industry or other non-academic job markets.

This list of challenges gives an impression of what *Junior Researchers* are confronted with in the current European research system. While there are already some measures in place to meet these challenges, many are still causing serious problems and repeatedly discourage talented *Junior Researchers* to follow a research career. Hence, we plead for keeping this group of researchers in focus and investing further efforts into appropriate counter-measures.

Contact

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