

# Pilot study reports on the career paths of doctorate holders

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ESF has just published a report on a pilot study of the career paths of post-doctorates and doctorate alumni from five research funding and research performing organisations: AXA Research Fund, France, Fonds National de la Recherche, Luxembourg, Goethe Graduate Academy at the Goethe University Frankfurt, Paul Scherrer Institute, Switzerland and TDR, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, a co-sponsored programme of UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank and WHO.

The study comprised focus groups and a survey of 880 doctorate holders. Participating research organisations were provided with statistical and focus group reports for their specific cohort of doctorate holders with results benchmarked to the entire sample of doctorate holders. The overall response rate to the survey was 57% (with 499 respondents); the collective response rate for organisations that fully followed the protocol was 70% with one organisation achieving an 86% response rate.

Main findings included different research outputs and satisfaction levels between respondents with employment continuity and those with temporary contracts. Those on permanent contracts produced higher levels of outputs of societal relevance (patents, policy impacts and public engagement activity) than those on temporary contracts. Those with tenure were also significantly more satisfied with important aspects of their work environment including scientific environment, organisational culture and support available for their career development.

The report discusses the related issue of growing numbers of doctorate holders internationally and the preference of doctorate holders for a career in academia resulting in bottlenecks and crushing levels of competition for very few posts. The low level of transfer to other employment sectors is noted as is the need for enhanced guidance information and policy strategies to encourage alternative career choices.

The mobility patterns that emerged indicate that doctorate holders are highly mobile with some 90% having worked or studied in another country for a period of at least three months. This is in keeping with the pattern reported in the OECD Careers of Doctorate Holders (2013) survey. Geographic mobility tends to be intra-European largely. North America is also a draw for this group. Within Europe, the mobility pattern seems to be uni-directional, i.e. from Southern or peripheral countries into Northern European countries. Those who move country to undertake their doctoral study seem to base themselves in those countries subsequently. Concerns are raised in the report about this asymmetry. While it was acknowledged that a scaled-up study would be required to allow more in-depth exploration of the apparent geographic trends from the pilot, such movement, unchecked, could further weaken already fragile economies.

The existence of an explicit funding policy to encourage the return of doctorate holders or their equivalent appears to be one way to tackle this issue as evidenced by the experience of TDR whose alumni do return to their country of origin after qualifying or post-doctoral experience abroad.

The report culminates in a set of recommendations aimed at doctoral funding and employing institutions as well as European policy-makers. It will be presented at the Luxembourg EU Presidency Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) conference on 10-11 December 2015.

ESF is planning to provide a career tracking service to countries that wish to study their doctorate holder populations on a once-off or recurring basis following the success of the pilot and its endorsement by respondents (85% of whom indicated willingness to participate in a follow-up) and participating organisations.

ESF has studied research careers through various members' initiatives, notably the Member Organisation Fora 'Research Careers' and 'European Alliance on Research Careers'. It provides administrative, management and coordination services to the scientific and academic communities.

**More information:** More information on the project (including the report) is available on [www.esf.org/career-tracking-pilot](http://www.esf.org/career-tracking-pilot)

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