

**IRSA response**  
**Higher Education Research Group -**  
**Framework document on researcher careers**

---

The Irish Research Staff Association (IRSA) welcomes the draft framework document as an important contribution to policy development in fourth-level research. The initiative by the Higher Education Research Group to set out a framework for researcher careers is potentially a significant advance, which is long overdue. We believe that several issues arise which require clarification or in some instances a modification of the approach proposed by the working group.

**European Context**

The framework document refers to a European Commission initiative ‘Better Careers and More Mobility: A European Partnership for Researchers’. While member states are required to adopt a national action plan based on the principles outlined in this paper, Ireland has so far failed to do so. Any official action by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has been striking by its absence. The adoption of such a national action plan, providing for portability of grants, enhancing the training and skills of researchers, and the achievement of attractive employment and working conditions, is urgently required if the aspirations of the framework document are to become a reality.

**Recommendation 1: Proposed career title structure**

There will be general agreement among researchers on the necessity for a career structure, but several aspects of the proposed model are flawed and open to misinterpretation. In particular, the framework document suggests that the first phase of research should be considered ‘an internship phase’ with career development a key goal. While few would dispute the need for more coherent career development, the characterisation of this phase of research as an ‘internship’ is inappropriate and open to various misinterpretations, none of them positive for researchers or funding agencies. It should be apparent that PhD graduates have already completed a considerable period of training in research; many will also have undertaken other elements of career development and none can be regarded as ‘interns’. Such an approach ignores the

demanding apprenticeship already served by PhD graduates and devalues the PhD as a qualification. Moreover, it is unlikely that future generations of graduates will be attracted by a research ‘career’, which involves a further phase of internship after the PhD itself. It is more appropriate to indicate that the first phase of postdoctoral research is an integral part of a research career, incorporating a training and/or mentoring element and career development goals as outlined by the working group.

The career structure outlined – from Postdoctoral Researcher to Senior Research Fellow – may also be too inflexible. In particular, the proposal that only a very small number of Senior Research Fellows would be appointed indicates a rigid pyramid with very few researchers reaching the apex of their chosen career. The attainment of a reasonable level of upward mobility through promotion and career advancement is essential if a meaningful career structure is to be achieved.

#### **Recommendations 2-4: Career Development**

The inclusion of researchers within formal performance appraisal systems, of the kind used for permanent staff, should only be undertaken within the context of an overall career structure. The application of performance appraisal procedures to researchers on a stand-alone basis, in the absence of formal mechanisms for career progression, would be pointless and counter-productive. In general, the recommendations of the report with regard to promotion and professional development should be implemented as a whole and not on a selective basis.

#### **Recommendations 5-8, 12: Recognition for professional achievements and skills**

The proposal that researchers should engage in ‘continuous professional development’ is reasonable, but requires the full collaboration of funding agencies and HEIs. As suggested by the report, appropriate mechanisms should be introduced to give formal recognition for activities undertaken by researchers in addition to ‘pure research’, including teaching, administration and mentoring. It is particularly vital that researchers are given formal credit within HEIs for postgraduate supervision, which has become an important element of the activity of such staff across the third-level sector.

Recommendation 7, providing that funding agencies would allow researchers who have contributed to a funding application to be named on the proposal as a ‘significant contributor’, should be implemented as a matter of urgency. The current situation where researchers write or contribute to grant proposals but are denied recognition for their efforts is inequitable and damaging to the career prospects of researchers. This practice is also a significant barrier to innovation and is indefensible in the context of creating a knowledge economy.

In general a more flexible sectoral approach towards funding applications would facilitate world-class research and innovation within Irish universities. Funding agencies should set out to remove limitations that currently prevent researchers from applying for funding or holding grants in their own name. The development of a formal agreement between employers and funding bodies to support the development of ‘an attractive and appropriate career structure for researchers’ (**Recommendation 12**) would be useful in establishing principles for career support and management. The report also envisages that such an agreement could lead to the identification of agreed expectations and responsibilities between researchers, managers, employers and funding bodies. Yet such a framework will be effective only if researchers are able to contribute fully to research in their chosen field, not least by participating in the acquisition and management of research grants.

### **Recommendations 9-10: Mobility and recruitment**

The adoption of measures to facilitate mobility of researchers on an inter-institutional or international basis is welcome. But facilitating mobility should not be regarded as a substitute for viable career paths within Ireland. There is a real prospect that a well-intentioned initiative to encourage international mobility could simply become a convenient ‘safety valve’ for surplus PhD graduates. The framework document is undoubtedly too optimistic in suggesting that ‘initial employment abroad does not indicate a loss to the Irish research system but rather their continued progression in a successful researcher career.’ This may well be true during buoyant economic conditions, which facilitate the return of well-qualified graduates to Ireland. But the reality of

recession and the contraction of job opportunities in the domestic economy significantly undermine the prospect of attracting the best researchers back to Ireland after they have gained international experience. In the present economic circumstances, PhD graduates who secure research or lecturing jobs abroad are unlikely to return. Policy-makers need to adjust their focus to the current economic and employment environment.

### **Recommendation 11: Gender**

The Irish Research Staff Association supports official initiatives to achieve a more equal representation of women in the Irish research system. We very much welcome the recommendation by the working group that HEIs should address barriers to participation among female researchers and ‘develop specific policies such as flexible working arrangements and other research supports.’

### **Recommendation 13: Employment Law**

The report correctly identifies the significant implications of employment law for the relationship between HEIs and contract researchers, noting that HEIs must take full account of changes in employment law over the last decade, notably the Protection of Employees (Fixed Term Workers) Act, 2003 (FTWA). It would be valuable if the HEA would take the lead in providing detailed information to employers about their contractual obligations to contract research staff, as there is an increasing level of confusion and potentially contention in this area.

### **Recommendations 14-16: Funding structures**

The proposal that funding mechanisms be examined to support the career development of researchers and provide for relevant social costs is a significant element of any viable career structure. This recommendation should be an important element of any initiative to implement a framework for researcher careers.

The cautious and tentative treatment of a potential salary structure to complement the proposed framework for researcher titles is disappointing. The working group acknowledges the obvious lack of any clear remuneration framework for researchers, but

notes only that research funding bodies, in consultation with HEIs, should submit proposals on an appropriate salary structure for consideration by the Department of Education and the Department of Finance. The introduction of a transparent, workable and equitable salary structure, associated with the job titles proposed by the HERG document, is indispensable to the successful implementation of the career structure envisaged by the working group. The establishment of a meaningful framework for researcher careers is impossible in the absence of an appropriate salary structure, which is accepted across the higher education sector.

### **Implementation**

The proposal that the Department of Education should establish a working group ‘tasked with developing an agreement in relation to the career development of researchers based on the recommendations in chapter 3 of this report’ should be implemented in an inclusive fashion. IRSA believes that contract researchers should be represented on this group; it is appropriate to involve the representatives of researchers in important policy discussions, which may lead to agreements concerning their future entitlements and responsibilities. Researchers have valuable expertise from working on the ground within the system, which would allow them to make a valuable contribution to the deliberations of the group. Moreover, in line with best practice during the partnership process over the last decade, all the relevant stakeholders should be included within such a forum for policy discussion and recommendation.

-----