

20 Years of the European Charter for Researchers: Time to Turn Principles into Systemic Change

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Two decades of relevance

In this year, 2025, we are marking the **20th anniversary of the publication of the European Charter for Researchers**.¹ Let us treat it as an important occasion to celebrate it, and to renew our commitment to its principles and original spirit. The Charter recognized early on that research and innovation excellence is inseparable from the people who make it possible. Europe cannot meet its strategic goals, whether in innovation, sustainability, democratic resilience, or talent attraction, without elevating research careers to the level of national and European priority.

The Charter was first introduced in 2005 as a Recommendation of the European Commission. It did not come from a vacuum, but as an important piece of the implementation of the **Lisbon Strategy**², introduced in the year 2000. The strategy aimed for the EU “*to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*”. The strategy was a product of the same sentiment that sparked the **creation of the European Research Area (ERA)**³ in the same year, making the creation possible of the **European Research Council**⁴ in 2007 and the **Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R)**⁵ in 2008.

The key role of research for the European Union was reinstated in 2010 in the **Europe 2020 Strategy**⁶, again as a Communication of the Commission. This special focus on researchers themselves, together with a recognition on creating a deeper, stronger ERA came back again in a 2020 Communication⁷. This time, it provided a more practical provision of creating a “*toolbox of support for researchers' careers*”. This vision ended in shaping the Council Recommendations that **introduced a dedicated framework, and updated and expanded the Charter in 2023**⁸, also broadening its scope to all public and private organisations employing researchers and to make it a true *career compass*. The new Charter clarifies researchers' rights and links institutional principles with individual skill development. It is also important

¹ Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2005/251/oj>

² European Council. (2000). Presidency Conclusions: Lisbon European Council – Employment, economic reform and social cohesion. Towards a Europe based on innovation and knowledge. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

³ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Towards a European research area, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52000DC0006>

⁴ Commission Decision of 14 December 2007 setting up the European Research Council Executive Agency for the management of the specific Community programme Ideas in the field of frontier research in application of Council Regulation (EC) No 58/2003, [http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2008/37\(1\)/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2008/37(1)/oj)

⁵ Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2005/251/oj>

⁶ European Commission. (2010). Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (COM(2010) 2020 final). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52010DC2020>

⁷ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A new ERA for Research and Innovation; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0628>

⁸ European Council Recommendation establishing a European framework for researchers' careers and updating the European Charter for Researchers; <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1640/oj>

to recall that since May 2018, and according to the current HR Excellence in Research award guidelines⁹, it is not possible any more for organisations to formally endorse the Charter without formally committing to its implementation by applying for the **HR Excellence in Research award**¹⁰.

It is clear that the focus on researchers' working conditions and careers never really left the European policy agenda. Yet, two decades later, data and testimonies **show weak and fragmented implementation**, persistent precarity, and a mounting sense of urgency for decisive and ambitious actions. This was reported clearly by the Draghi¹¹, Letta¹² and Heitor reports¹³, and demanded loudly by the stakeholders in the field of research and innovation (R&I)¹⁴.

Challenges and directions

Today, with renewed emphasis on R&I, talent circulation, and the creation of a stronger European Research Area, **the Charter must evolve** from a voluntary reference document into a foundation embedded in policy and practice. This requires an ambitious, concerted effort. On one hand, governmental and intergovernmental institutions need to translate the Charter's principles into law and funding frameworks. On the other hand, research-performing organisations must internalise and apply the Charter beyond only formal endorsement, in line with the HRS4R.

Several challenges can be identified:

1. **Persistent career precarity.** A large portion of research work, and especially fundamental research, is performed by researchers working in precarious conditions, in numerous cases, with limited working and contractual conditions. This has detrimental effects on the mental health and work-life balance of researchers.
2. **Fragmented implementation of good practices.** Despite the efforts by the EU and several member states, the presence of a common framework for coherent inter-compatible research careers and working conditions is largely a work in progress. The lacking implementation has resulted in a fragmentation that affects researchers and EU competitiveness alike.
3. **Insufficient incentives and support for research careers.** The research careers need to be able to compete on the labour market with other career paths. This cannot happen without offering appropriate reimbursement and employment conditions in long-term, stable contracts, and a clear career progression.

⁹ HR Excellence in Research award Guidelines (1 July 2025); <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2025-07/Guidelines%20HR%20Award%203.7.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/hrexcellenceaward/european-charter-researchers>

¹¹ Draghi, M. (2024). The Future of European Competitiveness—A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en

¹² Letta, E. (2024) Much More Than a Market. European Council. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>

¹³ Align, act, accelerate – Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/9106236>

¹⁴ (a) Eurodoc and MCAA, *Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3082245>; (b) ISE, *A Manifesto for Early Career Researchers*, 2020, <https://initiative-se.eu/2022/09/16/manifesto/>; (c) Eurodoc, *Eurodoc statement on high quality employment conditions for researchers*, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8105629>; (d) Eurodoc and MCAA, *Statement by Eurodoc & the MCAA: Wishlist for the ERA Act*, <https://zenodo.org/records/16309750>

4. **Narrow assessment and rewards systems.** The promotion and funding systems still often rely on outdated indices to assess researchers' outputs, despite evidence on their negative impact on the research quality and the lack of incentivisation of diverse impacts of researchers' work, such as science communication.
5. **Limited information flow.** Many attempts at the implementation of good practices never leave the ranks of the policymakers and university bodies to reach the researchers themselves. This lack of information flow makes their adherence to them improbable and their effects impalpable. This is particularly true for early-career researchers, who often have limited awareness of the principles of the Charter, of HRS4R, and of how these are implemented in their local context.
6. **Lack of co-creation approaches.** The implementation of the Charter largely benefits from the establishment of communities of practice that need to widely include all stakeholders, from institutions to representatives of researchers themselves. Currently, the engagement of researchers or their representatives is limited.
7. **Equitable opportunities under attack.** Recent developments in the global geopolitical scenario have put policies of equitable opportunity under stress, threatening the same values that inspired the creation of the Charter.

The challenges can be harmoniously tackled by a set of initiatives:

- **Implementing European employment frameworks.** Europe needs clearer and more coherent standards for research employment. A common framework can reduce fragmentation and ensure fair, predictable working conditions. It should support long-term contracts, strong social protection, and mobility without penalties.
- **Reforming of research assessment.** Evaluation systems must move beyond narrow metrics. Modern assessment should value diverse contributions, including, but not limited to teaching, mentoring, open science, teamwork, and societal impact. This will promote integrity, quality, and innovative research practices.
- **Embedding of Charter principles into national law and policy.** The Charter should become more than a recommendation. Member states should integrate its principles into legislation, funding rules, and institutional requirements. Clear monitoring and accountability will ensure consistent implementation across Europe.
- **Providing financial incentives for research careers and connected support services.** Attractive careers require adequate funding. Incentives should reward institutions that offer stable contracts and strong support services, and in particular, those institutions that commit to the implementation of the Charter through the application process for the HR Excellence in Research award.
- **Enhancing the representation and participation of researchers.** Researchers must be involved in decisions that shape their careers. Their participation in institutional and national governance strengthens the relevance and legitimacy of reforms. Stronger networks and co-creation practices help capture researchers' real needs.
- **Ensuring stable funding for research institutions.** Institutions need predictable, long-term, and sufficient funding to plan their workforce and support career development. Less reliance on short-term project grants will reduce precarity. Stable funding creates better conditions for excellence and long-term research strategies. This requires not only substantial EU-level investment, but also firm commitments from member states to reach the 3% of GDP target set in the Lisbon Strategy.
- **Restating the importance of policies for equitable opportunities.** Equity and inclusion remain essential to the European Research Area. Policies must protect equal opportunities for all researchers, regardless of background or status. A diverse research system is more creative, resilient, and aligned with European values.

This COST CCA aims to contribute to the proposed solutions with concrete examples and recommendations.

Concluding remarks

The **20th anniversary of the publication of the European Charter for Researchers** is not just a commemoration. It is an invitation to complete the unfinished project that began twenty years ago. To fully realise Europe's strategic vision, the Charter must become a living instrument, shaping legislation, institutional strategies, and everyday research practice. Europe has the tools, examples of success, and a growing community, committed to change. What is needed now is political will, coordinated implementation, and a shared conviction: investing in research means investing first and foremost in researchers.

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