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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: *Preparation of the Competitiveness Council on 9 and 10 June 2022*
Supporting young researchers in times of crisis
Policy debate

In preparation for the policy debate at the Competitiveness Council on 10 June 2022, Delegations will find attached a Presidency note on supporting young researchers in times of crisis .

SUPPORTING YOUNG RESEARCHERS IN TIMES OF CRISIS**Context**

The successive crises in recent years have shown the need to be better prepared to face them and to be more responsive, in particular through logistical and financial support. All sectors have been affected, including research and innovation (R&I), which has created additional constraints and obstacles, particularly in terms of career (recruitment, employment, development, resources, etc.). The difficulties faced by young researchers in times of crisis cannot be ignored, especially since the young researchers are key to addressing the major global challenges of today and tomorrow. They constitute our research capacity of tomorrow, our ‘lifeblood’, and thus contribute and will contribute to ensuring that the European Union remains in the global R&I race.

In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic has, among other things, had a significant impact on researchers, in particular on young researchers. Recruitment processes and mobility projects have been delayed or cancelled. Successive lockdowns led to the complete or partial closure of laboratories, making it difficult to carry out research and to forge links at national and international level. Higher education institutions have also had to adapt the way they operate in order to ensure they can carry out their training and research work during crises. Not to mention the mental health consequences that have been identified.

Moreover, geopolitical instabilities, including conflict situations such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, pose even more challenges for young researchers. Some of them are forced to leave their country and abandon their research projects.

These difficulties may reduce students' willingness to embark on and pursue a doctoral pathway, detract from the quality of scientific output and hamper the creation of a European Research Area (ERA) in which researchers move freely. They are therefore a barrier to the competitiveness of European research at global level.

In response to these crisis situations, Member States have adopted a number of measures in the field of research and innovation, but also in other sectors such as social policy, employment and education.

However, the urgency with which they are confronted leads them to first set up initiatives at national level, the framework of which is often considered to be more agile and flexible, and only afterwards do they coordinate at European level.

Faced with these challenges, young researchers need to be supported by public policies at national level. However, some actions would become more effective if brought to European level.

More broadly, and beyond emergency situations, consideration should also be given to consolidating a framework that is conducive to the faster and sustainable integration of young researchers into the labour market. In this respect, the introduction of measures specifically aimed at the young researchers at both national and European level is an option that should be explored or developed.

In this sense, a number of initiatives currently under way at European level are expected to have a positive impact on the careers of young researchers. For example, of the 20 actions of the European Research Area Policy Agenda, which is annexed to the Council conclusions of November 2021 on the future governance of the ERA, Action 4 focuses on setting up actions to promote attractive and sustainable research careers, such as the launch of an observatory for research careers, the creation of a toolbox of support measures to improve the attractiveness of research careers in academia and beyond, or the development of a European framework for research careers, which could then be tested by European Universities alliances as part of a pilot project.

Many of the other 19 actions of the Policy Agenda will also have an impact on young researchers. This is the case, for example, for Action 3, which aims to make progress towards the reform of the assessment system for research, researchers and institutions. The assessment of research should make it possible to assess the performance of (young) researchers and of research in order to achieve the highest quality and impact.

In addition, the Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe, approved in April 2022, stress that particular attention must be paid to students and young researchers whose studies and careers have been affected by the pandemic.

Finally, responding to the challenges posed by the green and digital transitions requires a stronger relationship between science and society, as reiterated in the Council conclusions on European missions. As they are on the interface between science and society, researchers, and especially young researchers, have a significant role to play as role models for young people. Furthermore, the involvement of citizens in science, enshrined in the very concept of European missions, requires training in such new working methods as participatory science projects.

Thus, more coordinated action at European level is essential not only to attract and retain future generations of researchers in order to find solutions to societal, environmental and economic challenges, but also to identify and remove obstacles faced by researchers from the start of their careers. This coordination will promote the development of suitable and sustainable research careers, which the Council called for in its conclusions on deepening the European Research Area: providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality.

Questions for debate

The French Presidency of the Council of the European Union wishes to initiate a debate on the following questions:

1. During the recent crises, what are the main difficulties faced by young researchers of which you have become aware? What measures or types of measures have been put in place in your country to support them?
 2. What lessons can be learned from this? For which measures would there have been added value (in terms of efficiency, agility, flexibility) if they had been coordinated at European level?
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