

July 2014

## Open, transparent and merit based recruitment

### CESAER Comments on the report of the

#### Expert Group 2013 'Recommendations on the Implementation of the ERA Communication'<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of CESAER the basic principles and procedures for an open, merit- and equal opportunity-based labor market for researchers in Europe are comprehensively included in the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (henceforward abbreviated as C&C). CESAER fully supports the principles of C&C and includes the recommendation to all its members in the measures promoting the Human Resource strategy for Researchers (HRS4R). Since autumn 2012, CESAER is a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> Cohort of the Institutional Human Resources Strategy Group and already organized seminars on this topic for CESAER members (Leuven September 2013, Aachen October 2013, and Delft May 2014). In this line, CESAER supports all reasonable measures taken by the Commission that will help to implement C&C all over Europe.

Most of CESAER member institutions use the EURAXESS Job Portal which sounds like an easy solution to the problem of wide and universal advertisement. In practice, however, EURAXESS does not always provide the best form of distribution. In many cases well established websites organized by scientific communities are effective instruments and ways for combining the strengths of both alternatives should be explored.

CESAER can further agree to most of insights and conclusions of the report, such as the call for

- openness and transparency of hiring procedures
- emphasis on merit
- emphasis on removing legal and other institutional or regulatory barriers
- sufficient time between putting up the advertisement and the closure of the call
- adequate information on the profile and the requirements of the position
- adequate information on working conditions, social security, measures for work-life balance and the like
- no discrimination nationality or language □ English as the lingua franca in research
- international perspective of hiring procedures
- including external, independent experts in hiring committees (at least for certain levels of positions)

These requirements for recruitments are in accordance with the general principle of excellence that is governing European research. However, as in other strategy papers as well there is a discrepancy between the call for excellence and the insight that this call may lead to a concentration of excellent researchers at certain institutions – which are correctly called centers of excellence. We understand that this tendency may be detrimental to ERA but we do not see any precautions in the recommendations to counteract this tendency in an effective way. To a certain extent the recommendations in the conclusions seem to be rather incidental/technical and partially not really feasible in the context of striving for excellence in research while completing ERA in an inclusive way at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission: Recommendations on the Implementation of the ERA Communication". EUR 26538, Brussels, 2013, pp. 8. 31ff., 59

One reason for this is in our view the lack of clarity as to which level of researcher positions the recommendations are addressing (R1 through R4)<sup>2</sup>. We strongly support the idea that appointment committees for level R4 (researchers leading their research area or field, i.e. professorships and very senior researchers) and – maybe R3 (researchers who have developed a certain level of independence, i.e. principal investigators) positions should include external, independent experts with an international standing and background in the field. However, this does not seem reasonable to be applied for more junior positions. Furthermore, we doubt that publishing the list of the members will be really helpful; we rather conjecture that leading experts will decline invitations to join committees under such a condition. However, we are aware that in some member states there are legal provisions for the publication of such lists<sup>3</sup>. Finally, we do not embrace in a general way the idea that information on the decision process and arguments voiced pro or contra specific candidates should be proliferated. This rather has the potential to hinder the further career of the persons in question (admittedly it might help the decision process of appointment committees in other procedures the same person will apply afterwards). However, what we can imagine is to establish a feedback system for junior candidates at very early stages of their career on the reasons that led to a certain decision and how to improve their track record and standing in their field and thus their application dossier.

We would like to recommend including other aspects more prominently, such as the removal of any legal and regulatory impediments, such as the German ‘Habilitation’ or the Italian ‘National scientific qualification’ and equivalent accreditation requirements in other countries which tend to prevent younger researchers from acting as independent professionals in the most productive part of a researchers life cycle. In this context, we would like to refer to the US system where a large number of young researchers start their academic career more or less right after their PhD as they are hired as assistant professor and proceed independently – merit-based – in their career path to a tenured position through the tenure track system.

Overall, we do not consider any further legislative actions to be necessary or reasonable for achieving the goals of ERA (the gap between legislation and practice is rightly deplored in the report). As pointed out above, C&C stands as a very comprehensive basis and excellent leading principle for HR strategy and management in higher education and research institutions: what is clearly needed is that institutions are really convinced or may be convinced that applying C&C is in their best interest.

We are convinced that institutions in the top league acquired their leading status exactly by

- being autonomous in their procedures and decisions and facing little if any impediments by national regulations
- defining HR development for research as a priority
- providing independence to researchers at an early stage after their PhD
- offering an attractive working environment based on adequate funding
- adhering to excellence as the main decision criterion when filling positions and thus preventing nepotism and inbreeding.

Therefore, national procedures (concours or concorsi and the like) seem a rather outdated HR instrument today in academia. It is a well-established notion in the EU that to meet the challenges of

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission: Towards a European Framework for Research Careers. Brussels, 21<sup>th</sup> July 2011

<sup>3</sup> E.g. in Italy, it is mandatory to publish (or to make available) the list of the committee member in order to ensure the implementation of the principle of transparency in recruitment and selection, In addition, it is mandatory to publish the decision outcomes, even more strictly for First and Second Segment Professors positions than for junior positions.

tomorrow there is a strong need for structural changes within institutions of research and higher education and there can be no doubt that changes are especially asked for regarding HR. It would therefore be worthwhile to connect to respective initiatives on the EU level and see whether any synergies are offering themselves.

In this context four more aspects may be brought up:

1. While it is true that the language aspect is given some consideration in the report, it may not be done so sufficiently. Advertising positions in English might help to attract the candidacy of non-native speakers, at the same time institutions must be willing to follow up, though, and pursue the whole hiring procedure (such as interviews and correspondence, information on the profile of the position, legal texts, offers and work contracts) in English as well –both for the sake of non-native speaker candidates as well as external, international members of the appointment committee.
2. Again with regard to language it is clearly stated in the report that no discrimination can be tolerated. It does not take much to realize that this does not stop once the hiring procedure proper has stopped. At least in a MINT environment (which CESAER represents) institutions must be willing to accept that newly hired non-native speaking employees may go on using English both in the lab environment and in teaching – at least for a transitory period. Whereas national legislation in this context is difficult to change, institutions should be encouraged to adapt in this respect.

Above all for young researchers (R1/R2 level), who may not have sufficient means readily available, it is important that their expenses for traveling and lodging are covered when invited for an interview.

3. Experience shows that very often researchers do not come on their own, but have partners who have a career of their own and children. Thus today the hiring of a new researcher does not just include obvious aspects such as salary, pension plan, resources for their research a.s.o., but additional aspects such as the career of the partner, housing, schooling, taxes and quite a variety of everyday matters have to be addressed as well in the hiring procedure. Taking into account specific gender aspects in this context it is most important that such measures are targeted at facilitating the mobility of female researchers. CESAER welcomes that the need to establish dual career and integration services has been fully acknowledged by the Commission, e.g. by supporting projects within the EURAXESS initiative on this topic.
4. To conclude, we would like to draw the attention to another aspect: as may be expected from an organization such as CESAER we adhere to the notion that research and teaching/education cannot be separated. In view of the goals of ERA the modernization of university curricula (and partly also pre-university curricula) is most likely to play a crucial role: it is at this stage that young people can be attracted to the career of a researcher. However, this requires that curricula reflect both the state of the art as well as the frontier in a field, that the university teachers are competent didactically and are able to transfer research results immediately to their students and thus show the attractiveness of a researcher's career. Advocating a more comprehensive doctoral training certainly is a sensible step in the right direction and CESAER has also started a joint working group on Innovative Doctoral Training together, with the partner associations CLUSTER, EuroTech Universities, IDEA League, and Nordic Tech Five. However, we think it would be necessary and advantageous to even start at an earlier stage already. A modernization and/or adjustment of curricula might also help to reach another important goal of ERA: as examples from the US show reformed curricula in engineering led to a sky-raise of the number of female students which in turn will eventually lead to higher numbers of female researchers.