

ERA POLICY BRIEF



CALL: HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01

TOPIC: HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-50

PROJECT: **SECURE**: SUSTAINABLE CAREERS FOR RESEARCHER EMPOWERMENT (SECURE)

www.secureproject.eu

TYPE OF ACTION: HORIZON COORDINATION AND SUPPORT ACTIONS

SCOPE OF THE POLICY BRIEF

In this policy brief, the Sustainable Careers for Researcher Empowerment (SECURE) project reports on the progress made through cooperation of 18 consortium partners that seeks to strengthen Sustainable Careers for Researchers in the European Union (EU) and beyond and provide a first set of policy insights to the European Commission (EC) for further policy development.

Policy Background

Ever since the launch of the European Research Area (ERA) in 2000, researchers have been at the core of its development as drivers of innovation, science, and technology, contributing to knowledge generation in Europe. However, there is a lack of recognition of the research profession and a need to strengthen research careers and make them more attractive.

Policy measures are required to ensure increased recognition of the researcher occupation and promote a range of career opportunities, both in academia and beyond. In this respect, targeted training and professional development of researchers' transferable skills is necessary.

The ERA Communication¹, referred to a toolbox of measures to be developed by 2024 with the aim of fostering more attractive research careers and reducing precarity as well as supporting intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobility and targeted training.

The SECURE project has a key role in supporting the implementation of these policy measures as well as for providing specific feedback for adaptations and additional measures.

Project Identity

SECURE is a two-year project, that started on 01 January 2023 and is due to end on 31 March 2025². The geographically and institutionally diverse consortium gathers 18 partners from 13 European countries including 11 EU Member States (16 partners) and 2 Associated Countries (2 partners)³.

Research Parameters

The SECURE project strives to develop coordination and support measures to adapt, trial, implement, and mainstream a common Research Career Framework (RCF) and Tenure Track-Like Models (TTLMs). The RCF and TTLMs will offer research-performing organisations (RPOs) and research-funding organisations (RFOs) a set of options to support the recruitment, employment, training, development, progression, and mobility of researchers with the aim of improving research careers and reducing career precarity.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A628%3AFIN>

² The project was initially due to end 31 December 2024 but an extension by 3 months has been granted.

³ <https://secureproject.eu/partners/>

The RCF and TTLMs are being built upon key existing policies and recommendations, including the recent EC Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European Framework to Attract and Retain Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurial Talents in Europe⁴ (including a revised European Charter for Researchers), revised ESCO, and recent ResearchComp. The RCF and TTLMs are further being developed in close collaboration with key stakeholders within and outside the project consortium, including RPOs, RFOs, organisations representing both researchers and businesses, recruitment agencies, and other relevant projects.

The first versions of the RCF and TTLMs will be opened for consultation with key stakeholders and the research community to gather feedback and make improvements before finalisation. These first versions will also be trialed at selected RPO and RFO partners within the project consortium to gather feedback on practical implementation and already build a user base for the proposed RCF and TTLMs. The RCF and TTLMs will at a later stage be promoted widely via project partners and their networks as well as via the EURAXESS network (including EURAXESS service centres and hubs) and the new ERA Talent Platform.

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS

The SECURE project has conducted a state-of-the-art review on literature on RCFs⁵. The review looked at existing RCFs, with a focus on recruitment and employment conditions, career development and progression, and interinstitutional, intersectoral, and international mobility. Key literature was identified, and recommendations were provided to feed into the development of the SECURE RCF. The selection of literature was based on a bibliographic analysis conducted via the Scopus database. Searches using key terms produced 8339 potentially relevant articles, which after screening were narrowed down to 69 relevant articles, and combined with an extra 38 articles identified by consortium partners, resulted in 105 core articles for the project that were fully reviewed: 35 on RCFs; 18 on recruitment and employment conditions; 31 on career development and progression; 21 on interinstitutional, intersectoral, and international mobility.

The SECURE project has also conducted a state-of-the-art review on existing literature and good practices for TTLMs⁶, with a focus on funding schemes, recruitment and employment conditions, and career development. The review used a definition of ‘tenure track’ by the League of European Research Universities (LERU) which is a “fixed term contract advertised with the perspective of a tenure, i.e. permanent position at a higher level, subject to positive evaluation and without renewed advertising of and application for the next position”. However, as the aim of the SECURE project is to develop a flexible range of models that may be applicable across institutions, the project has deliberately chosen the term ‘Tenure Track-Like’ for the models that will be proposed and trialed in the project. The selection of literature was based on a bibliographic analysis conducted via Scopus. Searches using key terms produced 11149 potentially relevant articles, which after screening were narrowed down to 708 relevant articles, and combined with an extra 4 articles identified by consortium partners, resulted in 83 core articles for the project that were fully reviewed: 26 articles on TTLMs; 18 on funding schemes; 16 on recruitment and employment conditions; 23 on career development. The review also identified a range of institutional, regional, and national examples by RPOs and RFOs.

1. Please describe the challenges you encountered to work on the project’s objectives and how you tackled or intend to tackle these challenges.

The project is primarily building upon the EC Proposal for a Council Recommendation and European Charter for Researchers to develop the RCF and TTLMs. A delay in the publication of the EC proposal (whereby the European Charter for Researchers is annexed to the proposal) resulted in a delay in project activities (and thus in working towards the achievement of the objectives) to access and interpret the final version of these two critical policy documents. The project remained in close contact with the EC services as well as with key representatives of ERA Action 4 on ‘Promote Attractive Research Careers, Talent Circulation, and Mobility’ with regard to the development and publication of both documents and plans for the project. The project has also adjusted its timeline and submitted a request for amendment to extend the project by 3 months. Both documents have in the meantime been published and are now being integrated into the project activities.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2023%3A0436%3AFIN>

⁵ http://secureproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SECURE-WP-1-Deliverable-1.1_V2_30042023_final.pdf

⁶ <http://secureproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SECURE-WP-1-Deliverable-1.2.pdf>

2. Based on your project's experience so far (and if applicable), briefly outline case(s) that you consider as good practice and of interest to other institutions or to policymakers.

The list of 105 core articles that were reviewed for the state-of-the-art literature review on RCFs (see Annexes 1-4 in D1.1) will be of high interest to relevant institutions and policymakers. The following core articles are especially noteworthy for the developing work in the SECURE project related to RCFs:

- Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers (2019)⁷
- European Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European Framework to Attract and Retain Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurial Talents in Europe (2023)
- European Charter for Researchers (2023)
- European Competence Framework for Researchers (2023)
- European Skills, Competences, Qualifications, and Occupations Classification (2023)
- Evaluation of Research Careers Fully Acknowledging Open Science Practices (2013)⁸
- Knowledge Ecosystems in the New ERA: Talent Circulation and Intersectoral Mobility (2022)⁹
- MORE4 Study: Survey on Researchers in European Higher Education Institutions (2021)¹⁰
- Precarious Careers in Research: Analysis and Policy Options (2022)¹¹
- Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017)¹²
- Reducing the Precarity of Academic Research Careers (2021)¹³
- Researcher Development Framework (2010)¹⁴

The list of 83 core articles that were reviewed for the state-of-the-art literature review on TTLMs (see Annexes 1-4 in D1.2) will also be of high interest to relevant institutions and policymakers. The following core sources are especially noteworthy for the developing work in the SECURE project related to TTLMs:

- Academic Career Structures in Europe: Perspectives from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria and the UK (2018)¹⁵
- Federal Ministry of Education and Research: The Tenure Track Programme (2023)¹⁶
- Structural Properties and Epistemic Effects of Scientific Careers in Transition to Tenured Professorships (2022)¹⁷
- Tenure and Tenure Track at LERU Universities: Models for Attractive Research Careers in Europe (2022)¹⁸
- The Tenure Track Model: Its Acceptance and Perceived Gendered Character (2023)¹⁹
- Time to Tenure in Spanish Universities: An Event History Analysis (2013)²⁰
- Translating Tenure Track into Swedish: Tensions when Implementing an Academic Career System (2017)²¹
- What and How Long Does It Take to Get Tenure? The Case of Economics and Business Administration in Austria, Germany and Switzerland (2019)²²

⁷ <https://zenodo.org/record/3082245>

⁸ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/47a3a330-c9cb-11e7-8e69-01aa75ed71a1>

⁹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94a6a2ca-00c1-11ed-b94a-01aa75ed71a1>

¹⁰ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/487036ad-bdd1-11eb-8aca-01aa75ed71a1>

¹¹ https://www.wifo.ac.at/en/publications/search_for_publications?detail-view=yes&publikation_id=70473

¹² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260889>

¹³ <https://doi.org/10.1787/0f8bd468-en>

¹⁴ <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/researcher-development-framework-rdf-vitae.pdf/view>

¹⁵ <https://nifu.brage.unit.no/nifu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2487666/NIFUreport2018-4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁶ <https://www.tenuretrack.de/en/the-tenure-track-programme>

¹⁷ <https://zenodo.org/record/6975389>

¹⁸ <https://www.leru.org/files/Tenure-and-Tenure-Track-at-LERU-Universities-Full-paper.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2813-4346/2/1/5>

²⁰ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0077028>

²¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075079.2016.1239704?journalCode=cshe20>

²² <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0475.2008.00449.x/html>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Topic 1: European Framework for Research Careers

- **How does your project contribute towards the overall European Framework of Research Careers currently under adoption?**

The SECURE project will develop an RCF and TTLMs that build directly on the European Framework of Research Careers. The proposals in the EC Proposal for a Council Recommendation (and annexed European Charter for Researchers) will be translated into concrete coordination and support measures (in the RCF and TTLMs) to enact the framework and improve research careers at RPOs and RFOs. These translations will be trialled by selected RPO and RFO partners and improved via consultation with the research community.

- **What would be your recommendations, on the basis of the activities you conducted, to ensure full implementation of the aspects of the European Framework for Research Careers relevant to your project?**
 - The literature on research career frameworks showed numerous already existing concepts and guiding principles, in particular transparency, merit-based research careers systems, gender equality, and Open Science. Nevertheless, successful implementation seems to be challenging. Adaptability of the framework across various institutions considering internal practices and local policies as well as appropriate funding strategies is vital for its effective application. All stages of research careers (R1-4), including recruitment, development and progression, mobility and the different roles of researchers should be reflected in the RCF. It should also endorse a fair and transparent researcher assessment system to address adequately the deficits around gender equality and the use of Open Science. Necessary structural measures to support the implementation of the framework will be offered through the TTLM developed in WP2. In alignment with key policy developments and the work of ERAC, the EFRC will provide strategic input and structural guidance for the development of the SECURE RCF.
 - For recruitment and employment conditions for researchers, the review concluded that despite country-specific structures and local regulations and policies and different funding budgets and strategies, insecure and instable employment is widespread. Nevertheless, several common approaches and efforts to improve the precarious situation of researchers were identified. These include the endorsement of aligning local laws and initiatives with the Charter and Code, incl. its future version announced in the Council Recommendation²³ (COM(2023) 436 final), and the development and strengthening of local initiatives aiming at improving employment conditions and recruitment procedures. Concrete examples for recommendations focus on paying more attention to ensure gender-equality across all stages of the research career and on developing and using mentorship programmes to guide through the recruitment process.
 - The literature review on career development and progression for researchers found two main categories to be considered crucial for career development and progression: Training and counselling and HR policies and regulations to foster good research and collaboration culture. Structured mentorship should complement individual supervisors to ensure best possible outcomes for the mentees. Support structures for career planning include general guidance (e.g., formalised courses or peer-group interventions) and specialised trainings (e.g., leadership, grant writing) as well as suitable tools (e.g., RDF, online tools). Adequate policies such as part-time regulations to account for partnering or family are particularly important with respect to gender dimension. They should however also cater to the needs of different career paths. Specific attention should be given to indicators and metrics with regards to career progression.
 - The review on interinstitutional, intersectoral, and international mobility defined comprehensive planning of international mobility to be a key factor in reducing adverse effects usually associated with the re-location, economic pressure, work-life-balance. “Institutional investment” and early stable employment can achieve a win-win-win solution where individual researchers, home and host

²³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0436>

institutions benefit, this is also positively impacting the brain-drain/brain-gain dynamics. The review highlighted the need to promote intersectoral mobility with an emphasis on bi-directional mobility, facilitated by incorporating criteria outside the traditional evaluation system such as supervision quality, entrepreneurial mindset. Along these lines, the development of a RCF should enhance researchers' skills for the different types of mobility via holistic training programmes.

Policy Topic 2: Strengthening Careers

- **Is there a need to develop a model tenure-track system at the European level for early career researchers? If you believe so, how do you think it should be structured?**
 - This review²⁴ highlighted the huge variance internationally around understanding of TTLMs and what is feasible, desirable and culturally acceptable at institutional and national levels, given the variations in funding and local legislation. The SECURE project must look to reflect this variance by offering a wide range of options institutions might consider and demonstrate how they can operate on a practical and administrative basis. Models must reflect national context and highlight where examples are numerous but equally where gaps are identifiable.
 - The review highlighted the number of examples available in some countries when compared to others, for example a large number could be drawn from Germany however, TTLMs identified in the project must avoid any suggestion that one system is superior or that there is only one way to implement a programme due to the varying approaches adopted in different countries. Examples collected should be clear and practical and operate as a helpful tool for any institution with an interest in this topic. They should also be scalable.
 - The SECURE project will create their own project definition on TTLMs supported by a clear set of principles as to what is important when establishing a tenure track system highlighting specific elements, e.g. appropriate salary level and a transparent evaluation system. These will be complemented by the best and good practice examples.
 - Funding of TTLMs is also of real interest with limited and variable information, particularly the balance between core and project funding and funding for research teams. The relationship between this, wider institution funding models, expectations on individuals and research teams should be considered.
 - Whilst universities are autonomous in terms of their Human Resource and Management practices, they are restricted by the legal framework of the country in which they exist. The employment status of researchers will therefore be variable and there is a need to collect varying ways of approaching this in order to mitigate researcher precarity and promote positive working conditions. It is will also be important to collect examples at varying levels of seniority.
 - The review highlighted some unintended negative consequences of the tenure track system, for example limiting mobility or a tendency to recruit a certain type of researcher, and therefore it is important to acknowledge and address some of the more challenging aspects of the tenure track system and consider how these may be mitigated.
 - Limited information has been identified from the perspective of research funding organisations, and it is important to consider the models from this alternative perspective. Additionally, the project should look to consider how these models relate to industry and mobility.
 - The development of the SECURE RCF (WP2) should incorporate flexible TTLMs and reflect their place in a RCF. Language and messages, particularly around researcher support and the principles of tenure track, should be complementary and the two parallel work packages should be developed in partnership to address precarity and create outputs that are of most benefit to the partner organisations.

²⁴ <http://secureproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SECURE-WP-1-Deliverable-1.2.pdf>

- Given the limited time for the trial phase of the SECURE project, particularly in comparison to the time it usually takes to achieve tenure, effort should be made to develop simple practical options so that meaningful initiatives are tested. These should be developed in collaboration with the consortium partners responsible for the trial.

Policy Topic 3: European Competence Framework for Researchers

- **Please specify what support you consider necessary to foster a wide uptake of ResearchComp (the European Competence Framework for Researchers) by all relevant users.**

Relevant recommendations are currently being developed in the SECURE project and will be included in the update to the policy brief when the recommendations are more mature.

- **Please share your recommendations on how transversal skills formal and informal training of researchers should be structured in universities/research organisations to make researchers' careers more attractive, stable, rewarding, and interoperable with the business sector.**

Relevant recommendations are currently being developed in the SECURE project and will be included in the update to the policy brief when the recommendations are more mature.



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This policy brief reflects only the author's views and the European Commission/REA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.