Enabling Early Career Researchers in Europe

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Two Preliminary Remarks on Early Career

- Differences between disciplines in the organisation of research
  - Some need long term planning in
  - Some rely more on independent work

- Need to take into account recent changes
  - Generalisation of short term employments for young researchers
  - Absence of tenure track schemes in several countries
The European Research Council (ERC)

- Initiated by a demand from the scientific community
- Long term process that converged 7 years ago
  - Role of Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE)
  - Role of some political figures, e.g. Mariano Gago
  - Endorsement by the Commission at the time of Philippe Busquin
  - Finally put in place under Janes Potocnik in FP7
  - Early days complicated: critical role of the first people in charge
  - Creation of an Executive Agency, “outside” the Commission
The European Research Council (ERC)

→ Simple model

- Only projects submitted by a single Principal Investigator
- Strictly bottom-up
- Long term funding: 5 year support
- Substantial funding: up to 400,000 Euros per year
- Frontier research (high risk/high gain)
Focus on Young Career

- From the beginning, *Starting Grants* from 2 to 8 years after PhD
- Soon realized, that the very young did not have a chance, introduction of a *Consolidator category*
- Now, two independent calls:
  - From 2 to 7 years after PhD
  - From 7 to 12 years after PhD
- Now 2/3 of the annual budget on young researchers
- Already 4300 ERC grantees in some 600 institutions
- But 50 % in 50 institutions in Europa
Impact on Early Career

- Opportunity for the PI to create a team around him or her
  - Access to independence
  - Complete freedom to choose the team members
  - Possibility of extra funds for equipment

- Success to ERC makes it a reference

- Comment from ERC Grantee: “forced to thing big”

- Portability of the grant
  - Grantees are sought after
  - Promotion may come

- More than 12000 PhD students and post-docs funded
Some Sensitive Points

- Interdisciplinary research
  - Not easy to evaluate
  - More and more in demand

- Support from the Host Institution
  - To prepare the application
  - To support the research work

- Adding to the unstable positions
The next generation of researchers?

- Traditional organisation of higher learning
- Changing organisation of public research
- Domination of early part of career by projects
- Renewed importance of team work
- Absence of clearly defined “Career Paths”
- Diminution of the number of stable positions?
  - Statistics of employment of researchers not reliable
  - Academia versus Industry
The next generation of researchers in Europe?

- Competition is much broader (Asia, Brazil, …)
- Attractiveness of European higher learning institutions
  - Often problems of procedure
  - Availability of positions follow rules that are external to the hiring process
  - Degradation of the professional environment
  - Social environment
- Lack of interest for sciences by students
- In some countries, decline in the number of students
The next generation of researchers in Europe?

Dear Academia,

I loved you, but I’m leaving you. This relationship is hurting me. It isn’t because of the predictably unpredictable long hours spent trying to get you to open up to me (I understand, I had to ask you in just the right way). It isn’t the frustrations of trying something that may just not be possible to do with you (but we just had to see didn’t we?). It’s not the chasing you around for sometimes thousands of miles, leaving behind my family and friends over and over to follow you. It isn’t even because of the neglect or the mistreatment, the living in less than ideal or even normal dwellings because you had so few resources to sustain me, the lack of acknowledgment, appreciation, or respect for what I offered you. I spent my best (and peak reproductive) years with you, hoping that we could get to the point where we could finally settle down before it was too late for me.
The next generation of researchers in Europe?

All of this took so much longer than you promised at the beginning of our relationship. No matter how hard I worked, you kept moving the target, saying “Oh I’ll commit when…”, but the list just kept growing. I sacrificed time, money, and sometimes physical and mental health to devote myself to you. And, believe me, there were others in line…promising commitment, stability, and respect. But I ignored them. I ignored the red flags. I had invested so much. I didn’t want to give up on us. You were just so damn…interesting…and I loved the people you connected me to. You really have a way of attracting wonderful people to you. People that care. I saw them start to drop away; start to distance themselves from you (or perhaps you from them). It started to become less clear what it was I had to do to stay with you, what you wanted out of me. It started to become apparent that you would not necessarily be there for me in the future. Though all of this got to me, the final straw was asking me to lie for you, so that you could progress in your eyes. Our relationship was supposed to be based on the pursuit of truth, love, and coming to know this universe intimately, together. These were the reasons I fell in love with you, the passions that bound us together…
I thank you for your attention.

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