



Does the European Researchers Charter deserve their birthday cake?

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Ten-year-old researcher charter suffers from low implementation

On the 3rd of March 2015, university heads from around Europe will gather in Brussels to celebrate the 10th birthday of the [European Charter for Researchers](#) and the [Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#). A decade after the charter's launch, it boasts over 600 [signatories](#). *EuroScientist* examines if anything has really changed for scientists since its introduction; and whether the charter has fulfilled its mission. The verdict is somewhat disappointing. This is especially true at a time where scientists need protection from precarious research positions and need better structured career paths.

The development of the charter was originally prompted by widespread concerns about working conditions for young researchers. "Employers were treating them a little like slave labour," says Jean-Patrick Connerade, emeritus professor of physics at Imperial College London, UK. "The idea was to create a code of good practice that institutions could voluntarily adhere to," says Connerade, who is also a former president of EuroScience and the coordinator of the charter's foundation.

Charter recognition

The charter describes the "rights, but also duties for employees and employers", and was supposed to increase the attractiveness of research as a career by harmonising the rights of researchers to stable employment, career development and mobility. Ten years on, Connerade's disappointment about the charter is palpable. "The problem was that a lot of

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people signed up for it and didn't implement it," he says, "There has been a tendency of universities and employers in Europe to pay lip service and just carry on as before."

Another major problem, he says, is that implementation was never monitored by the European Commission, partly for budgetary reasons, and partly "because they knew that national governments were not going to back them up."

For example, the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland ([CRASP](#)) was an early adopter of the charter and code but has also experienced problems with implementation and monitoring. "CRASP was actively promoting the Charter & Code in 2006-2009," says Wiesław Banyś, rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice and president of CRASP. "In recent years, the engagement in the promotion of the charter and code is significantly lower," he says "We don't have enough resources to monitor the impact and to what extent institutions have implemented it."

Multiple charters

Meanwhile, competing and complementary charters are springing up across Europe to fill the gaps. The UK Science Council's [professional registries](#) confer chartered status to scientists working across a range of domains; on the condition that they fulfill a set of professional criteria and demonstrate continued professional development. "The elements are very similar in both charters," explains Diana Garnham, chief executive of the UK Science Council, in London, "The real difference with what we do, is [to recognise] that an academic qualification is not a professional qualification."

A [French charter](#) was also launched at National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS) recently. Michèle Leduc, emeritus research director and president of the Ethics Committee at the CNRS, explains that this charter builds upon the European one. It is "mainly to reinforce the awareness of French institutions and universities about research integrity." There are worries that multiple charters and codes could confuse the landscape, diluting the impact of the European Charter.

Implementation challenge

As for the future of the Charter, the odds are that it is only going to be partly implemented. GEW recommends that institutions endorse the charter "without any reservations." Keller has observed some institutions hesitating to "implement recommendations concerning stability and permanence of employment." Indeed these still-burning issues provoked Europe-wide researcher [protests](#) last autumn. Connerade still believes that the charter and code have had some positive impact in this area. "Employers realise that they're in a defensive position," he says, "They can't impose things as blatantly as they did before."

Despite their failure to be fully implemented, such charters harbour common ground with trade unions' demands. The European charter includes a roadmap of good employment practice for employers and funders, which Garnham notes could be considered as "matters for unions." Andreas Keller, vice-president of the German Trade Union for Education and Research ([GEW](#)) agrees that there are "a lot of cross-cutting aims in the charter and code and in GEW policy".

Mobility

Another problem that the charter failed to address is researcher mobility. "[We must not penalise but have to encourage academic mobility," notes Keller by "upholding full pension and social insurance rights and recognising experience elsewhere." Connerade fully agrees, saying mobility is "one of the vectors of innovation."

Connerade had originally wanted to create portable pensions and a status of "researcher in Europe" to facilitate mobility, but this was blocked at a higher level. It is hoped that the European Research Area (ERA) will help in this respect. But researchers who want to move within Europe still face significant barriers remain regarding social security, administration and pensions—despite a recent limited [initiative](#) to create a pan-European pension pot for researcher being a step in the right direction.

PhD status

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The employment status of PhD candidates is another unresolved bugbear, despite inclusion in the charter. The European charter clearly states that all researchers, including postgraduate students and doctoral candidates should be recognised and treated as professionals. The UK Science Council does not however recognise PhD candidates as professionals since, according to Garnham, they are still in training and their professional experience too narrow. In contrast, Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, [describes](#) a PhD candidate as “more than a student; s(he) is a researcher at an early stage of her/his career.”

Despite the clear description of the PhD candidate in the European charter, the issue remains fuzzy enough that a group of European university and higher education representative organisations from France, Germany, Poland, Switzerland and the UK recently felt it necessary to issue a [joint declaration](#) on the subject. It states that “doctoral training is not to be understood as an additional study cycle.” Recent unrest flaring in the Netherlands around the recognition of PhDs as employees and not just students goes to show that such concerns are not [unfounded](#).

Lack of binding requirements

Some believe that the European Commission itself does not take the charter seriously. As Connerade puts it, “postdoc positions were being handed out to universities, some of whom were not applying the code properly.” Keller suggests “that the commitment to Charter and Code is a prerequisite for funding by the EU.” In a different approach, Garnham proposes that the charter could be improved by separating the responsibilities of funders and employers.

All in all, there is a sense that the charter is a valuable wish list worth keeping and worth practising. Unfortunately, it has turned out to be a bit toothless given the piecemeal implementation practiced by many signatories. Going into its second decade, Connerade remains upbeat about the future of the charter. “I think it’s correct to keep agitating about this document because the spirit of the document is to try and solve these problems.” In ten years’ time will we be celebrating how the charter finally hit its stride and improved working conditions for researchers? Or will we be mourning its demise into irrelevancy? Only time will tell.

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