



**Sustainable Careers For
Researcher Empowerment**

WP5

Policy Brief Promoting SECURE Research Career Framework

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1 Improving precarious research careers

While according to Eurostat data the number of researchers in the EU has risen considerably from 2,25 millions in 2013 to almost 3 millions in 2021, significant challenges persist with **precarious research careers** in EU countries. Many PhD candidates remain without an employment contract or social protection and many early-career researchers go from one fixed-term contract to the next without clear perspectives for permanent or open-ended contracts in research. Awareness and information about the range of possible careers in research is limited, be it within or outside academia. Training in transferable skills could be expanded, too, enabling researchers to qualify for a broad range of jobs. Talent drain continues to be an issue in several EU Member States.

Improving precarious research careers is not just about individual well-being. Career uncertainty leads to risk aversion in science, diminishing scientific productivity and research **excellence**. Unattractive research careers discourage talented people from engaging in research, limiting the **scale** of European research in times of a global scientific and technological race. **Fragmentation** of research career frameworks in terms of regulations, funding or institutional practices inhibit mobility and knowledge exchange in the European Research Area.

The EU-funded Sustainable Careers for Researcher Empowerment (**SECURE**) project aims at improving research careers and reducing career precarity. Between 2023 and 2025, 18 partners from 13 European countries have worked on a **toolbox of measures to facilitate the implementation** of the [Council Recommendation](#) of December 2023 on a ‘European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe’.

The SECURE “toolbox” offers (i) a research career framework (RCF) which consists of a comprehensive suite of actions to reform research careers and (ii) principles for tenure-track like career path models (TTLMs; see [SECURE Zenodo repository](#)). Both are intended to help research performing organisations (RPOs) and research funding organisations (RFOs) to adopt practices that increase the **attractiveness of research careers**, among them options to support the recruitment, training, development, career progression, and mobility of researchers. The work carried out in the project has built on desk research, consultations with researchers and stakeholders, a public survey collecting feedback from researchers and stakeholders across Europe, and trials by six partner organisations to test the RCF and implement selected RCF actions.

As such, SECURE is part of a wider range of activities undertaken within the **ERA Policy Agenda** action 4 on promoting attractive research careers, talent circulation, and mobility. Further supporting elements on top of the Council Recommendation are the new European Charter for Researchers (annex of the Recommendation) and related Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (**HRS4R** or HR Excellence in Research Award), [mutual learning exercise on research careers](#), job platform [EURAXESS](#), pension scheme [RESAVER](#), European Competence Framework for Researchers ([ResearchComp](#)), and Research and Innovation Careers Observatory ([RelCO](#)). The [ERA Talent Platform](#) is a one-stop-shop gateway for all these activities. Looking forward, the next ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 is set to strongly continue the previous work on research careers as a structural policy. With the announced ERA Act forthcoming in 2026, attractive and sustainable research careers should be a keystone of the “fifth freedom” of the EU Single Market, enhancing research, innovation and education across Europe.

1 See, e.g., <https://doctalent4eu.eu/>

2 See, e.g., <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1121429109> and <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733318300726>

2 SECURE Research Career Framework

The Research Career Framework developed by SECURE provides a comprehensive list of 8 action areas and 80 actions that translate high-level recommendations of the Council Recommendation into concrete actions for RPOs and RFOs. RPOs and RFOs can use the RCF to review their current policies and practices affecting the research careers that they offer or fund. It is a systematic and practical toolbox which can serve to determine and prioritise initiatives to improve careers as well as to examine in which aspect an organisation already performs well and in which ones there may be gaps.

The RCF is aligned with European initiatives including the [R1-R4 researcher profiles](#), European Charter for Researchers, HR Excellence in Research Award, EURAXESS, ERA Talent Platform, ResearchComp and European Competence Framework for [Research Managers \(RM Comp\)](#), European Skills, Competences, Qualifications, and Occupations (ESCO) classification, and RESAVER Pension Fund.

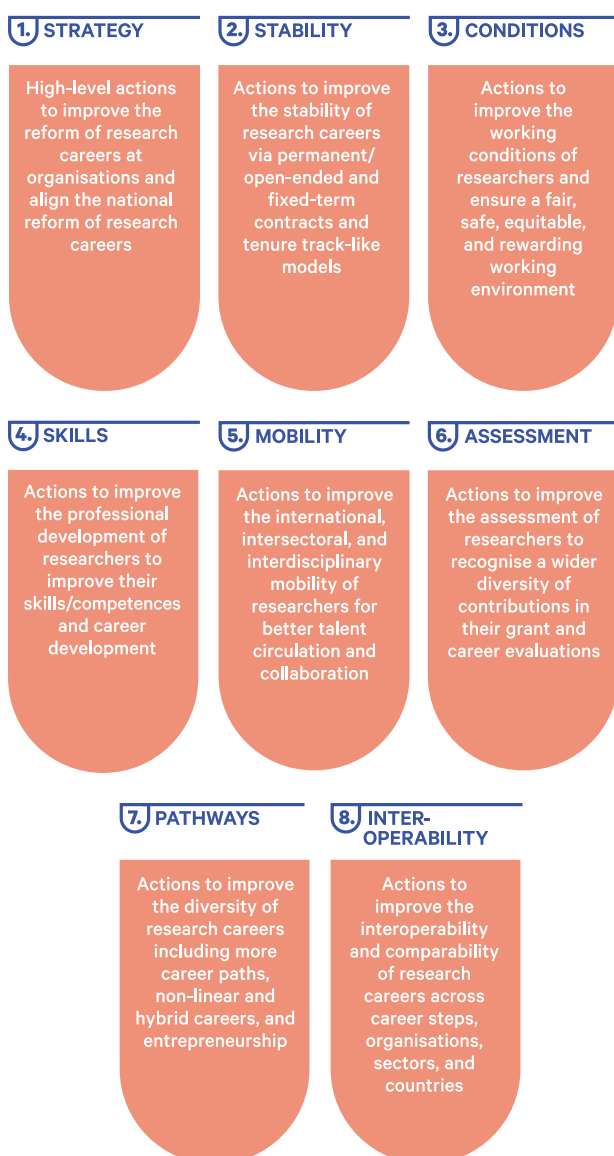


Figure 1. SECURE project's 'translation' of the eight pillars of Council Recommendations and Research Career Framework (RCF) into specific actions for the SECURE Research Career Framework (RCF).

In the following we highlight 3 actions as examples for each action area. The full details can be found on the SECURE [website](#).

1. Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and share best practices on reform of research careers at organisations • Endorse Charter for Researchers and apply for/renew HR Excellence in Research Award • Engage with key stakeholders to align national regulations and policies on research careers
2. Stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and share best practices on employment contracts for researchers and tenure-track like models (TTLMs) • Review and improve percentage of permanent/open-ended contracts for researchers • Define a threshold for successive number of fixed-term contracts and monitor compliance
3. Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure recruitment and progression are open, transparent, and merit-based • Review and improve remuneration for researchers to be competitive and commensurate • Review and improve support for equality, diversity, and inclusion of researcher
4. Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and improve support for professional development of researchers • Raise awareness on and add international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobility to professional development of researchers • Provide professional career development counselling with experts/mentors for researchers
5. Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify national and local barriers preventing triple-I mobility of researchers • Raise awareness on and support transfer of social protection entitlements • Promote value of PhD and related skills/competences to non-academic sector
6. Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and share best practices on reforming researcher assessment systems • Recognise diversity of roles, activities, and outputs of researchers in researcher assessment • Inform researcher assessors on value of reformed criteria for researcher assessment
7. Pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness on diversity of research careers including non-linear and hybrid careers • Review and improve support for entrepreneurship and knowledge valorisation • Track long-term career paths of alumni researchers at and beyond home organisations
8. Interoperability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and share best practices on adoption of R1-R4 profiles and ESCO classification • Refer to R1-R4 profiles in job/grant advertisements and relevant communications • Engage with key stakeholders on interoperability and comparability of research careers

3 SECURE trials of RCF actions

SECURE trial organisations selected at least one action per pillar of the RCF, interpreting and integrating them into individual **action plans to improve research careers** (see [SECURE Zenodo repository](#) for D4.1). Trials were running for 12 months from February 2024 until January 2025. The six organisations face a variety of **challenges**, such as career precarity and funding instability, retaining and attracting talent, recognition of diverse researcher roles, supporting early career researchers, new and broader forms of research assessment, fostering collaboration with industry or clear and equitable frameworks for career progression (see [SECURE Zenodo repository](#) for D4.2; a summary of lessons learned is also included there).

Trial organisation	Example actions	Type*	Country
University of Cyprus	Pathways: Engage with key stakeholders on recognition and support of diverse research careers	RPO	Cyprus
University of Rijeka	Assessment: Collect and share best practices on reforming research assessment systems		Croatia
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa	Stability: Review and internally discuss providing more permanent contracts to researchers		Portugal
Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI)	Skills: Collect and share best practices on ResearchComp and transversal skills/competences	RFO	Romania
Oceanic Platform of the Canary Islands (PLO-CAN)	Conditions: Collect and share best practices on improving the working conditions for researchers	RI	Spain
Adoc Talent Management (ADOC)	Interoperability: Raise awareness of and support adoption of R1-R4 profiles in the non-academic sector	RA	France

Table 1. SECURE trial organisations and implementation of selected RCF actions.

The actions to implement SECURE RCF need to be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of different research organisations. This is reflected in the flexibility provided to trial organisations in selecting and adapting RCF actions. The trials have led to the development of **improved career development resources and support services for researchers**, including training, mobility career guidance, and mentorship programmes.

*Abbreviations: RPO – Research Performing Organisation, RFO – Research Funding Organisation, RI – Research Institution, RA – Recruitment Agency

4 Principles of Tenure Track-Like Models (TTLMs)

The second key output of SECURE are **guiding principles for tenure track-like models** based on case studies in 9 European countries. Tenure tracks are typically career models for researchers leading from a fixed-term position to a permanent or open-ended one, dependent only on a positive evaluation, hence allowing for better career planning. They are recommended by the [Council Recommendation](#) as one tool that could **reduce precarious research careers**, if adopted more widely. Because of different national regulations and funding systems, it is difficult to develop a one-size-fits-all tenure-track model. As a result, SECURE has developed 9 overarching principles that could support any tenure track-like career path and accommodate different national contexts. We present these **principles** along with some implementation challenges encountered in the case studies of the project.

SECURE undertook **case studies in nine European countries**. Eight of them are universities, one refers to a procedure that enables permanent positions. In alphabetical order: Belgium (University of Antwerp), Croatia (University of Rijeka), Cyprus (University of Cyprus), Finland (University of Helsinki), Germany (Goethe University Frankfurt), The Netherlands (University of Maastricht), Portugal (NOVA University of Lisbon), Spain (R3 accreditation procedure) and the United Kingdom (University of Edinburgh). All the examined countries have implemented various types of tenure track-like models as a career path for researchers on fixed-term contracts (often postdocs) to (permanent) professorship positions, with Portugal having established them the longest, since 1979, and Germany most recently in 2017.

Implementation challenges for TTLMs vary across countries in line with the autonomy of institutions regarding the principles for TTLMs. E.g., in some countries researchers are **civil servants**, where institutions cannot autonomously decide on fair pay and benefits (principle 1) or tenure track models (principle 2) are legally difficult to establish, as in Spain. This can prevent institutions from being able to offer internationally attractive positions. Generally, tenure track is seen as one of the potential ways of addressing precarity as well as research career attractiveness, even if there can be drawbacks of TTLMs such as a potential negative effect on mobility. However, a key challenge for a more widespread adoption is appropriate **funding**.

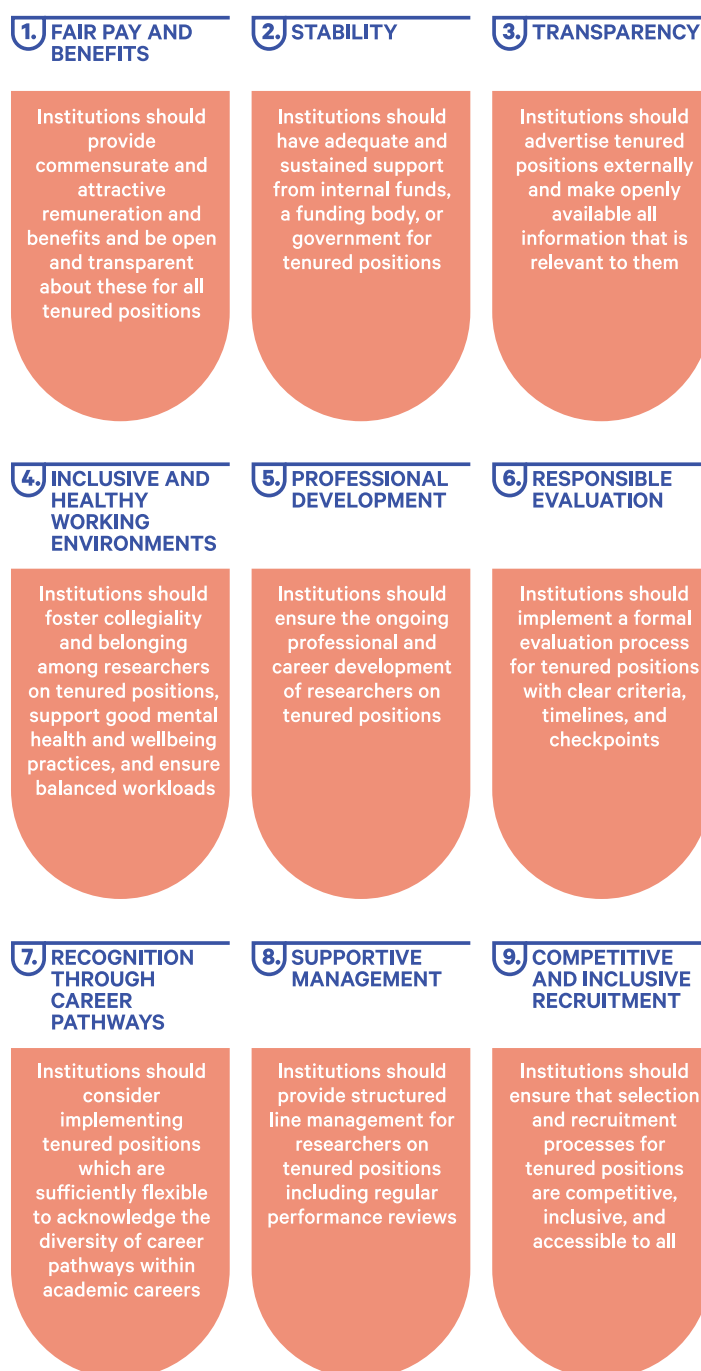


Figure 2. The nine principles of the SECURE Tenure Track-like Models with a description.

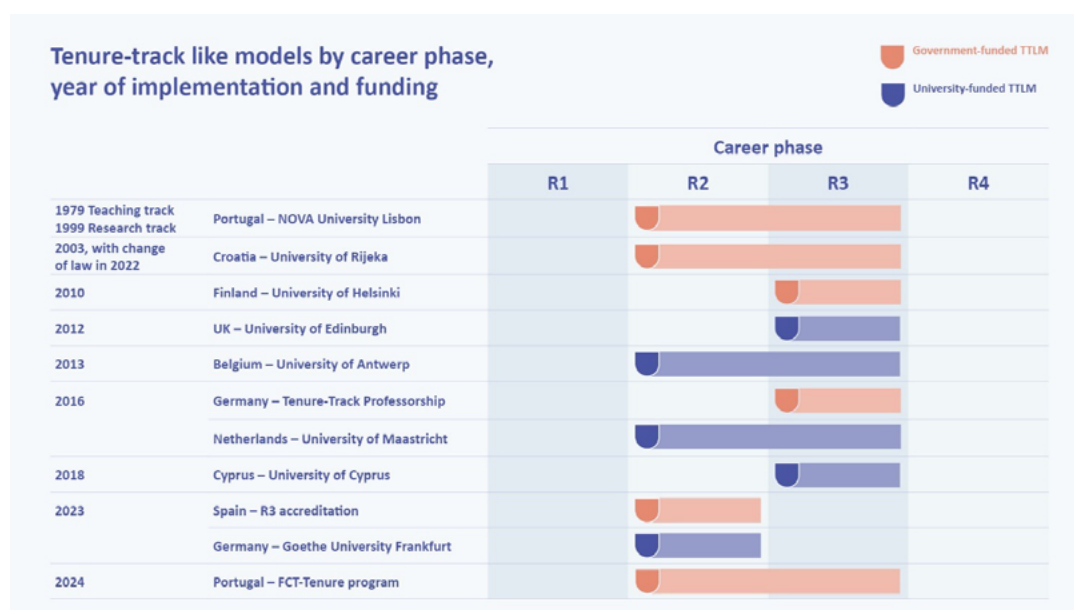


Figure 3. Case studies of tenure track-like models in Europe sorted by (a) year of implementation from 1979 (NOVA University Lisbon) until 2024 (Portugal – FCT-Tenure program) and (b) career phase addressed (R2, R3 or R2 & R3).

For those positions that are offered by means of a TTLM, it does seem to be common that once on the tenure track a researcher will most likely achieve tenure and instances of non-completion are rare. This is why **transparent, merit-based** and **open recruitment processes** are particularly important and may also be one reason why we have seen few efforts to prepare candidates for careers outside academia. In particular if the share of tenure track candidates that do not get tenure increases, offering **career services** and **training in a wide range of skills** will be even more important to improve research careers. It also helps to be frank to candidates at an early stage, or to provide comprehensive feedback. A **five-year period** to achieve tenure seems standard across Europe, with some flexibility to extend as required, for example due to ill health or caring responsibilities. This may be a barrier for those who may wish to progress further sooner and assumes a standard level of skill for anyone on the track. **More flexible and personalised ways of TTLMs**, allowing for different progression speeds, could be one option to explore in the future, while also setting clear maximum durations for TTLMs.

5 Recommendations to improve research careers

Recommendations for EU Institutions and Member States

- Implement the high-level recommendations of the [Council Recommendation](#) of December 2023 on a ‘**European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe**’, including the new **European Charter of Researchers**.
- **Promote the SECURE Research Career Framework (RCF)** as a key tool for improving research careers in Europe. Strengthening research careers will reduce precarity, increase excellence and scale and reduce fragmentation of EU research activities. Consider providing adequate support measures to implement (the action areas of) the RCF.
- **Promote the principles for Tenure Track-like Models (TTLMs)** ensuring they are flexible and adaptable to diverse career paths – including research, teaching and management – without restricting researchers’ mobility. There is a need for clearer definitions of tenure-track positions, more transparent career progression frameworks, improved assessment mechanisms and career support for researchers, particularly regarding opportunities in other countries and institutions. Ensure that organisations have both the legal capacity and sufficient funding to introduce TTLMs.
- Use the **SECURE RCF** to support the implementation of the principles of the Charter for Researchers, particularly regarding human resources policies and the HR Excellence in Research Award. **Embed the RCF into the HR Excellence in Research accreditation process** to align with the updated 2023 principles of the Charter. Streamline the Charter’s implementation procedure and improve synergies with other R&I policies while facilitating peer learning.
- **Promote more widely relevant European tools** among research performing and funding organisations (RPOs/RFOs) as well as researchers supporting the reform of research careers such as European Charter for Researchers, R1-4 Researcher Profiles, European Competence Frameworks for Researchers (ResearchComp) and Research Managers (RM Comp), EURAXESS

Recommendations for Research Performing and Research Funding Organisations.

- Use the **SECURE RCF** as a practical tool for research performing and research funding organisations (RPOs/RFOs). Its eight thematic action areas provide high-level strategic priorities, while the 80 concrete actions translate these priorities into specific steps that institutions can take to strengthen research careers and reduce precarity.
- **Implement the TTLM principles** developed in the SECURE project. Research performing organisations should review their existing policies and practices to ensure broader adoption of TTLMs.
- **Include researchers** in shaping institutional policies – particularly those related to research careers – and strengthen their role in liaising with senior leadership. Researchers should also be involved in implementing the principles of the Charter for Researchers, especially in human resources policies.



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