



Life After Graduation

(March 30th, 2017) The European Science Foundation launched a survey to see what career paths PhDs follow after graduation. Results are expected in June this year.

The [retrospective cross-sectional survey](#) follows doctorate graduates, affiliated to nine organisations: the University of Maastricht; Technical University of Munich; Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Bucharest, University of Split, University of Luxembourg, Institute of Science and Technology, Austria, and the AXA Research Fund, France. Following a successful pilot survey undertaken in 2015, it has already started, collecting over 1,800 responses to date.

Universities and non-university-based research performing organisations, as well as research funding organisations all want to understand and document the career trajectories of doctorate holders. This helps them to assess the impact of investment in research career development and to analyse practices aimed at the development of research careers.

Hans Ouwersloot, Project Leader at Maastricht University said, “Participating in this PhD survey will give Maastricht University an excellent insight in the careers of our PhDs. The outcome of this survey will give us guidance on the things we might need to change to support our PhDs even more in becoming knowledgeable, confident and responsible global citizens, and successful participants in the labour market. This is also an excellent opportunity to compare outcomes among participating institutions.”

While some European universities do track their graduates, much more can be done in a co-ordinated manner. The ESF’s career tracking survey is a step in that direction, building on its long-standing work in supporting research careers.

Some of the participating organisations have already taken part in the pilot survey carried out in 2015, and will be able to compare findings with the previous data collection. The questionnaire has a core part common to all organisations, as well as additional organisation-specific modules developed with the participating organisations.

Hans-Joachim Bungartz, Graduate Dean of Technical University of Munich said, “The Technical University of Munich has reshaped its doctoral education by introducing university-wide programs for transferable and scientific skills training, complementing the individual research of our doctoral candidates in their labs. For more than ten years now we have been enforcing interdisciplinary collaboration and the creation of international networks already on the PhD level. So from the ESF survey we plan to get further insights on how our alumni have benefited from these measures. The experience of the ESF and the joint approach of the survey with its international orientation will help us improve our programs and make our graduates fit for their future careers.”

More concretely, the survey will help understanding of where doctorate holders from the participating organisations moved in their careers: e.g. whether they went for research or non-research careers, whether they are employed or unemployed, or are in permanent or temporary positions. The survey will also explore their views on whether doctoral training has enabled them to develop towards their desired career goals, within or outside academia, and will help to understand the challenges of the various career paths followed by the doctorate holders.

Julia Boman, Science Officer responsible for Career Tracking activities at the ESF said, “In Europe, we need to know whether our research systems and job markets offer sufficient possibilities to realise the full potential of these highly trained individuals. This is all the more so in a general context where numbers of doctorate holders are increasing, in contrast to available jobs within academia. We want to provide reliable figures to our partner organisations about the various career paths of their doctorate graduates, in academia as well as in industry, education, health or public administration”.

In 2015, the [ESF ran a pilot study](#), in which the following organisations took part: the AXA Research Fund, France; the Fonds National de la Recherche, Luxembourg; Goethe University Frankfurt, the Paul Scherrer Institute, Switzerland, and TDR, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, a co-sponsored programme of UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank and WHO. Some of the preliminary findings include:

- Very high levels of employment among doctorate holder respondents (99%), with the majority in full-time employment (89%). However, a high proportion respondents reported insecure forms of employment such as temporary contracts.
- Significant differences in satisfaction and outcome levels between respondents with employment security and those on temporary contracts. Those on permanent contracts produced higher levels of outputs of societal relevance (patents, policy impacts and public engagement activity) than those on temporary contracts. Those with tenure were also significantly more satisfied with important aspects of their work environment including scientific environment, organisational culture and support available for their career development.

ESF Chief Executive, Jean-Claude Worms said, “We wanted to follow up on the initiatives of the ESF Member Organisation Forum and our first pilot survey, and to further develop this valuable career-tracking instrument together with ESF experts and participating organisations. Europe currently lacks a joint career tracking platform, and this survey offers an attractive bottom-up approach for universities and funding organisations, which is good in terms of economy of scale, flexibility of survey design and data comparability among the participating organisations”.

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Photo: Uni Marburg

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