

Bratislava Declaration of Young Researchers

As a human endeavour for common good, scientific and scholarly research plays a special role in our European Union – one that has the ability to transform people and society. The passion, ideas and curiosity that young people bring to research sustain it. This declaration – written by young researchers – calls on Member States and the European Commission (EC) to recognise the special role that young researchers play and aspires to better enable them: great ideas and ability are divorced of age, gender, or nationality.

1. We aspire to enable great people to realise their ideas to understand and improve the world.
2. We aspire to sustainable and transparent career trajectories.
3. We aspire to a diverse, collaborative, inter-disciplinary, open, and ethical research environment.
4. We aspire to a healthy work-life balance.

1. ENABLING GREAT PEOPLE AND IDEAS.

Young researchers must be empowered to fully contribute to the scientific community. At present they are discouraged and they are only passively involved. Barriers to entry are too high. The curiosity, motivation, enthusiasm and fresh perspectives that young researchers bring can only be realised by our research systems. They need to change to reflect this.

- 1.1 We call on funding agencies to radically **reorganise funding streams to trust and empower young researchers**, enabling them to pursue their ideas. The current economically oriented, impact-focused, bureaucratic, system is not compatible with fresh-ideas and fresh-thinking that young people have. Would any of our current systems have funded a young Einstein or a Marie Skłodowska-Curie? We believe this new paradigm is essential for research to truly transform society and meet the socio-scientific challenges (seen and unseen) that face us.
- 1.2 We call on the EC and Member States to **incorporate research and scientific skills into high-school education** through radical reform of curricula and methods of assessment: students must be given the opportunity to practice research and scientific thinking in schools – not just listen to teachers talk about it.
- 1.3 We call on the EC to **create sustainable and effective funding schemes** (e.g. Junior Research Grants) for young researchers, regardless of their age – including undergraduate and high-school students – to autonomously pursue their research ideas, the societal impact they may have, and to help them become independent in their careers as early as possible.

2. SUSTAINABLE AND TRANSPARENT CAREER TRAJECTORIES.

When starting one's research career, young researchers face the prospect of an extended period of career insecurity with non-transparent career progression. This provides an obstacle that can dissuade even the brightest young researchers from pursuing a research career. To secure a sustainable future for young researchers, clear and structured career paths in both the public and private sectors are required.

- 2.1 We call on the EC and Member States to urgently realise **employment-stability**, and **explicit criteria for career progression**. The structure of funding schemes should reflect this. The proportion of research scientists on short-term contracts is unacceptable and this affects the quality and impact of the science they do.

- 2.2 We call on the EC and Member States to provide structured opportunities for non-traditional career trajectories, such as **recruiting permanent staff researchers**, and mechanisms for better **mobility between the public and private sectors**. Academic institutions do not value this.
- 2.3 We call on principal investigators and research institutions to fulfil their duty-of-care with respect to the **training and career development of young researchers**. Employers must ensure that young researchers have the appropriate skill-set, mentoring, and networking opportunities to pursue a successful career, recognising that the majority will work outside academia. Funding bodies should support this.

3. RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

For research to transform society it must be done by people that represent it – all of them. There is an urgent need to widen participation in European research with regard to gender, age, race, ethnic & religious background, physical ability, sexual orientation, nationality, and geography. As well as researcher diversity, we must consider the diversity of environments where the research is done, removing barriers to inter-disciplinarity. The current ‘publish or perish’ and hyper-competitive environment is toxic to the research endeavour as it encourages extreme individualism, and is linked to an increase in fraudulent science. Member States and the EC are enabling this. These issues need to be addressed to create an inclusive, supportive and collegial research culture.

- 3.1 We call on the EC and Member States to support an **EU-wide equality and diversity charter**, which should become a pre-requisite for access to EU funds. As an example, the UK’s Athena Swan project *has* positively changed things.
- 3.2 We call on EC and Member States to empower young researchers to act on ideas that span traditional disciplines and sectors. This would involve **reorganising funding schemes and the research environment**.
- 3.3 We call on EC and Member States to further develop policies that enforce **free sharing of data and ideas** (e.g., open access publications and open data) and **ethical behaviour** (e.g. identification of individual contributions, post-publication peer review).

4. WORK-LIFE-BALANCE

Researchers love what they do. It is not entirely clear to us that the systems in which we work love us. In many cases our vocation and enthusiasm is translated into unreasonable working schedules, continuous availability, inappropriate salaries and unstable contract conditions. Researchers do not enjoy the same employment rights or conditions that other young professionals enjoy. This poses enormous challenges for young researchers to find a suitable balance between work and daily living. Requirements for researchers to be mobile in their career can accentuate these issues.

- 4.1 We call on research institutions to implement supportive and better **childcare provisions, parental care, flexible working practices** and provide **dual-career opportunities**. These should be provided at all stages of the research career, even at the PhD level. We call on the EC and Member States to enforce these mechanisms through legislation, whenever necessary.
- 4.2 We call on the EC and Member States to put in place mechanisms to **facilitate and equally reward diverse forms of mobility** such as inter-sectorial, interdisciplinary and virtual mobility. The current system only values geographic mobility.

We recognise that the issues raised in this document are complex. We call on Member States and the EC to sustain a dialogue with young researchers ensuring that they become an active part of policy development.