A pension fund for European scientists

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Scientists are part of a global community who freely exchange ideas and materials; many researchers are engaged in international cooperation and collaborative research projects. In fact, traveling and working abroad is not only a necessity; spending some time abroad as a graduate student, postdoc, or visiting scientist also boosts their careers. Studies that compared data from 16 countries concluded that foreign scientists often outperform their native colleagues and that they have larger international research networks [1,2]. Generally, given that most scientific knowledge is the result of collaborative research performed in many countries, mobility is important for progress.

Many transnational funding agencies—such as the European Research Council, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions or the Human Frontier Science Program—therefore stress or even require international mobility from their grantees. However, while mobility has its own benefits (even irrespective of a research project), there are also downsides of spending too much time working abroad. The greatest risk for scientists who spend an extensive period in another country is losing out on social security, in particular on pension rights in their home country. The 2005 European Charter for Researchers therefore urged its member states to pay particular attention to “the portability of pension rights, either statutory or supplementary, for researchers moving within the public and private sectors in the same country and also for those moving across borders within the European Union. Such regimes should guarantee that researchers who, in the course of their lives, change jobs or interrupt their careers do not unduly suffer a loss of social security rights” [3].

This is, for example, the case with the occupational/supplementary pension schemes

in both the UK and France. In the UK, the University Superannuation Scheme (the USS) calculates an employee’s pension based on the number of years of contributions to the USS divided by 80 and multiplied by the final salary at the time of leaving the scheme. Since salaries increase with seniority, the final salary and thus pension of a scientist who leaves the USS to work in another EU member state will be lower than the salary of a scientist who stays in the UK until retirement. In France, the *Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale* “validates” periods worked in industry, teaching, and other sectors in France as contributing to the pension or “*retraite du fonctionnaire*”, but it does not validate time worked in other Member States. The result is that a scientist who spends time abroad has a lower pension than one who has never left France. There is little chance that this will change soon within the EU. Pension and retirement schemes are part of the national social security systems that are organized by individual member states. Ironically, it is often easier to move between the USA and various EU nations that have a bilateral agreement to transfer contributions between each country’s social security systems.

Moreover, many scientists who go abroad with a fellowship or travel grant, are not part of any social security system and thereby lose years of contributions to a pension scheme. A recent survey of 104 funding schemes for postdoctoral researchers found that only 2 out of 15 funding schemes that promote international mobility offer some form of pension coverage [4].

To address these problems, the EU helped set up a Pan-European Supplementary Pension Plan for Researchers in 2011. This plan was not meant to offer an alternative to national/local pension systems, but had the stated objective of facilitating the removal of one of the barriers to the mobility of Professionals, by providing

occupational retirement benefits (second pillar benefits) to Professionals employed by research organisations [5].

Since 2013, this preparatory program has continued under another name, RESAVER, as a “Pan-European Pension Plan that enables mobile and non-mobile employees to remain with the same pension arrangement when moving between countries and when changing jobs” (www.resaver.eu). Finally launched in July 2016, RESAVER is meant to be a pan-European supplementary pension fund that is exclusive to scientists and researchers and is based on contributions from the employees and their employers or funding organizations. It was set up and is supported by Aon Hewitt, a global provider of management services, risk management, insurance, and reinsurance brokerage. At present, 286 organizations in nine countries are affiliated with RESAVER, which will be rolled out first in Austria, Hungary, and Italy. Institutions and scientists in countries that have not yet signed up to the RESAVER pension fund can instead join RESAVER Insurance as an alternative scheme. As of now, RESAVER is supported by the League of European Research Universities—which represents 21 universities from 10 countries, including Imperial College London and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, and the Universities of Paris-Sud and Pierre et Marie Curie in France, with an overall budget of €5 billion—and by the European University Association, which represents 850 institutions from 47 countries.

Given the above support for RESAVER—which was created to address the problem of pensions for scientists—it is a bit puzzling that the European Research Council only stipulates that principal investigators of its frontier research grants should enjoy “adequate ... insurance under the general social security scheme, such as

pension rights” [6]. Other funding bodies have also addressed the issue of pensions. The European Molecular Biology Organization was the first European scientific organization to introduce a portable pension plan in 2010, which provides its fellows with a monthly contribution to the pension fund of their choice (www.embo.org). After their fellowship, they can join a pension plan developed by MLP, a Heidelberg-based financial services company, which is managed by Allianz, an international insurance company. The Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire, CERN, allows transfer of pensions into its fund from another pension fund—provided the employer has contributed to it [7]. In contrast, the Human Frontier Science Program Organization does not support postdoctoral fellows who already have a pension scheme [8].

Despite these efforts by some funding organizations to address the problem, many other scientists will still lose out for being internationally mobile. This may have both short- and long-term consequences. Scientists could “vote with their feet” and, despite good scientific reasons for moving to another country, simply stay within their own social security system. Scientists could also put more pressure on EU member states using their role as reviewers or advisors. They could for instance downgrade applications from member states that refuse to

implement the European Charter for Researchers or do not join RESAVER. Committee members, reviewers, and advisors could also put pressure on the European Research Council to address the issue for its grantees.

Finally, the EU itself could develop an alternative to RESAVER by creating its own European Science Pension Fund for scientists who have moved between member states. Further modifying RESAVER may not be legally possible under the current treaty, particularly as scientists are often employed by different organizations. Such a fund would be modest initially; for instance, there were only about 1,400 postdoctoral researchers from other European countries working in France in 2014 [9]. Moreover, once a European Science Pension Fund has grown to include more researchers, the EU might take advantage of the potential leverage such a fund could exert to further improve the economic and social conditions of scientists [10]. The fund might even help in the progress toward a “Social Europe” by facilitating integration of the different social security systems of the member states.

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