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HR Excellence in Research Award  
 Section HR  
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## Summary of the results from the survey and focus groups on the European Charter for Researchers in relation to Lund University

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### Background

Lund University has held the HR Excellence in Research Award certification since 2020 and is currently on its second action plan in this process. In November 2025, the university will submit a report on the current action plan, as well as a new action plan for the coming three years, to the European Commission.

For the action plan covering the period 2026–2028, the university will base its work on the new European Charter for Researchers, which

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was adopted by the European Commission in December 2023. The university has conducted a survey targeting everyone engaged in research at Lund University in spring 2025, using over 8,800 email addresses registered in Lucat. In May, four focus groups were held, with representatives from all four EU research career levels, R1–R4. Subsequently, a GAP analysis will be carried out in relation to the principles of the European Charter for Researchers, forming the basis for the action plan for the period 2026–2028.

### Summary of the survey

Out of 8,838 possible respondents, 1,168 (13.2%) completed the survey. The survey was sent to individuals with email addresses in Lucat, based on roles indicating that they conduct research at Lund University. This includes employees, emerita/emeritus staff, doctoral candidates without employment, and other individuals engaged in research affiliated with Lund University.

There is an even gender distribution among respondents and a reasonable spread of ages, with a predominance of individuals aged 31–60. Six percent of respondents are over 70 years old.

Overall, all statements received a positive response; most respondents indicated that they believe Lund University meets the statements in some form (completely agree, largely agree, or partly agree). No statement received a predominantly negative response (do not agree at all). This aligns with the results of the GAP analysis conducted by the university prior to applying for the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2020. The university is already actively working on several of the areas covered by the European Charter for Researchers, but there is room for improvement.

Principles from the European Charter for Researchers (2023) to focus on in future action plans within the HR Excellence in Research Award, based on the survey and previous GAP analysis, are:

- Pillar 3, Principle 2, the section on early-career researchers
- Pillar 4, Principle 4: Supervisors and mentors

- Pillar 4, Principle 2: Career development and career guidance

### **The survey**

The survey is anonymous; it is not possible to link responses to any individual.

A series of statements, based on the 20 principles of the European Charter for Researchers, are assessed according to how well respondents feel they correspond with their perception of Lund University. There is also a “don’t know” option.

Respondents were asked to provide certain basic information, such as faculty affiliation, gender, position, age range, and how long they have been conducting research at Lund University.

The survey comprises a total of 22 statements, all of which are mandatory to answer. At the end of the survey, there is an opportunity to respond in free text to the question: “Is there anything you would like to add?”, to which 319 respondents (27%) contributed comments.

The survey was open from 7–21 March, with a reminder sent out on 17 March.

The survey was distributed to 8,838 email addresses obtained from Lucat. The selection was based on roles indicating that the person associated with the email address is engaged in research at the university in some form. In addition to employed researchers, the selection also included affiliates, guests, and scholarship holders.

A total of 1,168 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 13.2%. The response rate was somewhat higher than expected.

### **The statements**

The statements that received the most positive responses (completely agree + largely agree, with 40% or more) are:

2: Lund University recognises, encourages, and rewards the practice of open science in recruitment and career development (41%);

3: Lund University actively works to increase gender equality at all levels of the organisation (46%);

6: Lund University facilitates the free movement of research staff, scientific findings, and technology (40%);

7: Lund University enables research staff to freely choose and conduct research (53%);

8: The assessment and recognition of research at Lund University is based on a qualitative and impartial evaluation by peers and relevant experts (43%); and

9: The process for recruiting research staff at Lund University is based on transparency and qualitative, impartial evaluation by peers and relevant experts, supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators (44%).

No statement about the university received overwhelmingly positive feedback, which can be expected in such a large and decentralised organisation as the university.

The most negative responses (“do not agree at all”, 20% or more) were for the following statements:

5: Lund University supports non-linear and diverse career paths within research (28%);

10: Lund University promotes good and diverse career development for research staff (22%);

17: Lund University offers sufficiently secure employment for research staff (29%).

It can be noted that none of the statements received a markedly negative response. For those statements where 20% or more answered “do not agree at all”, the responses were fairly evenly distributed among the other answer options, with a slight tendency towards the uncertainty signalled by the answer “partly agree”.

### **Free-text responses**

The answers to the question “Is there anything you would like to add?” vary greatly in content. Many respondents express frustration with the allocation system, indicating that applying for external funding takes up too much of their time. Comments are also made regarding the university’s lack of better career pathways and the fact that doctoral candidates are not guaranteed permanent positions.

The position of ‘researcher’ is also highlighted in the free-text responses, with frustration expressed that this role does not provide opportunities for advancement within the academic sphere. Furthermore, holding the position of researcher prevents individuals from participating in academic collegiality, such as serving on boards and committees.

Some criticism appears to be directed at specific faculties and their handling of certain positions, recruitment, promotions, overheads, allocation of funds, or funding requirements.

Gender equality and equal opportunities are raised in some free-text responses, with the view that the university is not doing enough in these areas to achieve the intended effect. For example, there is criticism that using ERC grants as an indicator in recruitment or promotion does not take into account the underrepresentation of women in that group.

Recruitment and promotion are mentioned in some free-text responses, with suggestions that appointments are sometimes made based on personal connections. There is also dissatisfaction with the lack of promotion from lecturer/associate professor to professor.

A few respondents consistently chose the “don’t know” option, as indicated in their free-text responses, suggesting that they do not feel they have the overall perspective that the statements seem to require.

Some comments concern the survey itself. A few respondents indicated that they did not understand the purpose of the survey and suggested more questions about the local working environment or similar topics. The survey did not include “postdoctoral researcher” as

a possible position to select, which was clearly an oversight and may have led some individuals to choose not to respond.

The free-text responses are largely consistent with the type of criticism that is commonly encountered within the university.

## Background – Focus Groups

Four focus groups, each lasting two hours, were conducted, with the project leader acting as the focus group facilitator:

7 May: Professors (R4), a total of 4 participants. Observer: Johannes Persson.

12 May: Postdoctoral researchers and research fellows (R2), a total of 3 participants. Observer: Jimmie Kristensson.

14 May: Senior lecturers (R3), a total of 4 participants. Observer: Per Mickwitz.

15 May: Doctoral candidates (R1), a total of 4 participants. Observer: Marie Härstedt.

Each focus group began with a presentation of the four pillars of the European Charter for Researchers (2023) and the main points of each principle under the respective pillar. Thereafter, participants were invited to discuss the principles and related topics freely, and to reflect on how these matters are addressed at Lund University from their respective perspectives.

## Summary

The participants were engaged and took part with interest. There were clear differences between the groups regarding which issues engaged them the most, as they are at different stages in their careers. At the same time, there was remarkable agreement on many matters, despite participants coming from different faculties. It was expressed that, even if something is handled slightly differently in one faculty, the underlying issues are the same as in another, for example, research funding and employment.

Awareness of the HR Excellence in Research Award was very low in all groups.

All participants agreed that questions concerning ethical review, academic freedom, and research funding are important at Lund University, and that the university does what it can to influence external stakeholders and to safeguard research.

The issue that generated the most engagement in all groups was that of non-linear careers. There was a generally positive attitude towards the idea that a researcher should be able to move in and out of academia, and that the merits gained from experiences outside academia should also be valued in recruitment and promotion as a researcher or teacher. However, it was felt that this is unfortunately not the case today, and there was scepticism as to whether it would be possible.

Some suggestions from the focus groups:

- Make the course in research ethics in the Competence Portal mandatory for those applying for research funding. If you have not completed it, you should not be allowed to submit an application.
- Allow those with fixed-term contracts (researchers/postdoctoral researchers/research fellows) to apply for research funding, even if they are nearing the end of their employment.
- Create contact points between research fellows/postdoctoral researchers in different faculties to exchange ideas and seek collaborations. Facilitate such contacts in some way. Perhaps invite them to speed-dating for research projects at that level, between a couple or several faculties?
- Review the overhead (OH) system. How has it been calculated and why? Explain more clearly what OH is used for and show what would be lost if OH were removed.
- Better tailored support materials for development discussions for academic staff.

- Better adapted induction for new employees, especially doctoral candidates, research fellows, and postdoctoral researchers. Make all available support visible, especially support related to applying for funding. There is a lot of information and support, but you need to know it exists in order to look for it.

## **Focus Group Results**

### Summary of Themes from the Discussions

#### *Ethics*

All groups were largely in agreement that research ethics is important at Lund University. One participant with experience from another European country expressed that it was not considered a particularly significant issue there, but appreciated that it is given such importance here.

It was noted that there are varying levels of familiarity with handling ethical issues across different faculties. Participants requested more information and clearer support regarding research ethics within their faculties.

A proposal was put forward that completion of the research ethics course (in the Competence Portal) should be a requirement for submitting a funding application.

The proposed new law on ethical review was discussed by the R2–R4 groups. There is some concern about this among faculties that are not so accustomed to working with such matters.

#### *Academic Freedom*

All focus groups considered that, to a large extent, there is freedom to choose research topics, conduct research, and publish from the university's side. The R2–R4 groups highlighted that this freedom can be deceptive, as the funding for employment and research is dependent on external resources, which may be directed towards certain areas that the government wishes to prioritise. This constitutes a limitation of freedom. Similarly, freedom can be restricted by short-term and temporary contracts. At one department, it was mentioned

that fixed-term employees are not permitted to apply for funding when only a short period remains on their contract, according to a focus group participant.

It was also raised that some individuals feel they have too much freedom to organise their own work and presence at the workplace. The R2 group was very much in agreement that a research group is strengthened when its members are present at the workplace. This also enhances the creative environment, trust, and research. Clearer leadership was requested.

### ***Citizen Science***

The Charter mentions citizen science as an activity that researchers should engage in when possible. The focus groups discussed what is meant by the term and how it differs from the so-called “third mission”. It was noted that citizen science may not be applicable to all research, but that it is already being practised in several cases. It occurs quite naturally within certain technical and medical research fields, but also in artistic and some humanities research. It was considered more difficult to apply fully to legal research.

### ***Funding***

The stress associated with funding was a topic that arose in all groups except the doctoral candidates. Professors and senior lecturers had a more pragmatic view of the issue than postdoctoral researchers and research fellows. It was noted that this is not something the university alone can change.

A piece of advice from the R4 group is that a young researcher should build up a base of teaching alongside their research, so as not to be solely dependent on external funding in the future.

### ***Overhead (OH)***

The R2–R4 groups expressed concerns that overheads “eat up” their research grants. It was noted that there are significant differences in the size of overheads depending on where one is situated within the organisation. Overheads are perceived as something unnecessary that takes money, and there is a lack of clarity about what is received in

return and why they should be paid. Questions were raised about the roles of administrative and HR staff and why these costs are necessary. Why is overhead such a large proportion, and what is it based on?

### ***Support in Applying for Funding***

This topic was mainly discussed in focus groups R2–R4. The R4 and R3 groups felt that there is good support available when applying for, for example, EU funding. The R2 group was divided. Some had received tips about the research support service and had received excellent help there, while others had sought support from senior colleagues or tried to manage on their own. It was noted that it is not clear that support is available or where to find it. There was also discussion about the existence of courses or workshops one can attend, but again, these are things one tends to “discover” rather than being informed about by a supervisor or during induction.

### ***Employment***

Researchers in the R3 and R4 groups generally felt secure in their employment, although there can be concerns about funding for their positions. The concern was greater in the R2 group, while the R1 group did not express the same worries. One participant, who had previously worked in the private sector before joining Lund University, commented that employment at Lund University is no less secure than elsewhere. Even in the private sector, employment is affected by factors beyond the individual’s control. It is not uncommon for a position in private enterprise to change after a few years or to end due to changing circumstances. The difference compared to employment as a doctoral candidate, research fellow, or postdoctoral researcher is that in the private sector, you do not know when an end will come.

All groups expressed that the university should work towards employing more staff on permanent contracts. It was mentioned that in research groups, support staff are often employed on fixed-term contracts, typically for one year per person, which leads to frequent turnover during the course of a research project. This means there is

not enough time to get to know them, they become isolated, and the knowledge they acquire leaves with them, so the process must start over with the next person. This affects the fixed-term employees' ability to plan long-term, as well as practical matters such as taking out a mortgage. It was concluded that this is not sustainable for either the individual or the research group. There also seems to be a perception that a permanent contract is equivalent to a guarantee of employment for the rest of one's working life. It was also noted that the process for dealing with redundancy is perceived as burdensome, compared to simply employing staff for a shorter period (SÄVA/temporary contracts).

### ***Induction***

The younger researchers, R1–R2, spoke a great deal about induction. The amount and quality of induction received when starting at Lund University varied between individuals in the groups. It was reported that induction can differ between departments within the same faculty, or even between research groups. Questions were raised about how to calculate teaching time in relation to, for example, public holidays or bridging days.

### ***Mentor/Supervisor***

The R1 group was generally satisfied with their supervision. The R2 group experienced varying levels of support at their faculties/departments. There were reports of supervisors who seemed disconnected and were difficult to reach, meaning that individuals had to turn to others for help or support. Criticism has been raised with management, but nothing has been done about the situation.

### ***Assessment of Researchers***

The Charter highlights a qualitative perspective on the assessment of research, for example in connection with recruitment, and emphasises the responsible use of quantitative indicators. The discussions revolved around what constitutes a qualitative assessment and how it should be conducted, while also acknowledging that quantitative indicators are still necessary. It was noted that teaching is important when assessing academic staff.

In several places, the Charter stresses the importance of higher education institutions and funders valuing non-linear career paths, meaning that researchers' experiences from other positions and roles outside academia should be valued in the same way as a "straight" research career. Participants saw this as desirable and positive, but felt that it does not happen in practice. The question of how a non-linear career should be valued was also raised.

### ***Professional Development***

The R4 focus group expressed that everything they do is professional development and saw no direct need for any additional specific competence development for their group. They felt that meeting students constantly provides new perspectives and ideas.

The R2 focus group noted that there are courses in higher education pedagogy, but it is not always possible to get enough teaching experience. One person expressed that they were essentially thrown into teaching with a "here is the material, good luck" approach, having received no introduction or training.

### ***Career Development***

All groups touched upon career development in their discussions, but from different perspectives, with the R4 group focusing more on the career development of other levels.

The Charter highlights the opportunity for researchers at all levels to have a mentor to support their career development. It was mentioned that a couple of faculties have introduced mentors or equivalent roles as a complement to supervisors for doctoral candidates, to provide them with someone to talk to whom they are not dependent on. Another faculty has introduced mentors for their research fellows.

The R2 and R3 groups were positive about the idea of having a mentor who is more senior and perhaps even from another faculty. This could provide support in navigating the academic culture in particular but also offer an independent person to give advice on grant applications or similar matters.

Staff appraisals were raised in some of the groups, and criticism was expressed regarding the current support materials for these appraisals. They are not well adapted to the academic career path and would need to be better tailored.

Opportunities to meet doctoral candidates, research fellows, or postdoctoral researchers from other faculties in a collective or organised way were also highlighted, to enable the exchange of ideas or to find collaborations. Learning from each other was seen as valuable.