Europe faces a challenge in attracting and retaining scientific talent, especially in competition with the top American institutions. The issue is particularly important for early-career researchers, who are the most internationally mobile. Established researchers tend to attract less experienced colleagues and are less likely to move themselves. Once excellence is lost it is hard to retrieve.

EU policies on researcher mobility have focused on funding, such as through the European Research Council, as well as removing administrative barriers and creating a single market for research, in the shape of the European Research Area. In 2005, for example, the Commission recommended that “member states endeavour to ensure that researchers enjoy adequate social security coverage”, particularly portable pension rights.

Policy remains vague, however, on how to provide attractive working conditions for researchers. If you ask scientists what they value in a job, it’s no surprise that they mention money and working with top researchers. But they mention many other things. They value autonomy and a clear-cut career path, especially tenure. They want professional recognition, and the chance to solve puzzles and create knowledge. Factors such as quality of life and teaching load are also important.

Across Europe, research systems vary greatly in what they offer employees. Some are strongly hierarchal, others give early-career researchers more independence. Academics at the German Max Planck and French CNRS Institutes do no teaching, while those in eastern European universities do a great deal. How does this fit with what researchers actually want? The problem with asking them is that you end up with a long list of criteria, suggesting that the ideal job looks more or less the same for all academics. Funding, not surprisingly, was a major criterion in the equipment-heavy sciences. More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

Our results suggest that the ideal job looks more or less the same for all academics.'