



FORESIGHT STUDY • SCENARIOS • SUMMARY • JUNE 2026

Researchers' Careers in 2040

SCENARIOS DEVELOPED BY INSTITUTUL DE PROSPECTIVA

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The study “**The Futures of Researchers' Careers: What Challenges for EU Policy?**” identifies the long-term trends and disruptions facing Europe’s researchers, explores plausible evolution scenarios, and develops policy pathways to respond to them.

This summary presents the scenario component of the study. It opens with the global Science, Technology and Innovation landscape in 2040, highlighting the inherent tensions it creates for research careers under the influence of market forces and the limitations of current EU and national policies. It then turns to the response developed in the study: an aspirational alternative, **Living Knowledge 2040**, which rethinks how research is conducted, evaluated, and valued.

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THE CONTEXT

Global landscape of Science, Technology and Innovation in 2040

By 2040, global research is shaped by three mutually reinforcing dynamics: acceleration, concentration and contestation. They are driven and amplified by an increasingly capable AI layer — an “intelligence infrastructure” that learns from research, industry and society, and steers how knowledge is created, coordinated, shared and integrated.

Three dynamics shape the landscape

Acceleration

AI gives researchers near-instant access to almost the whole stock of human knowledge. It speeds up recombination, mixing existing ideas into new ones far faster.

The researcher’s role shifts toward framing problems, interpreting results, validating outputs and making judgments under uncertainty.

And the path from idea to market keeps getting shorter, as agentic AI — systems that can carry out multi-step tasks on their own — takes over more of the steps, from design and testing to reaching the market.

Concentration

Super Big Tech controls the key AI platforms, accumulating capital and cognitive power and becoming a geostrategic player.

Scientific communities rely more on large platforms for data, tools and computing power, and increasingly reconfigure into large, mission-driven research networks.

States and regions back strategic innovation ecosystems, built around research and industrial infrastructure, seeking competitiveness in key value chains.

Financialisation further reinforces concentration through cycles of investment and volatility.

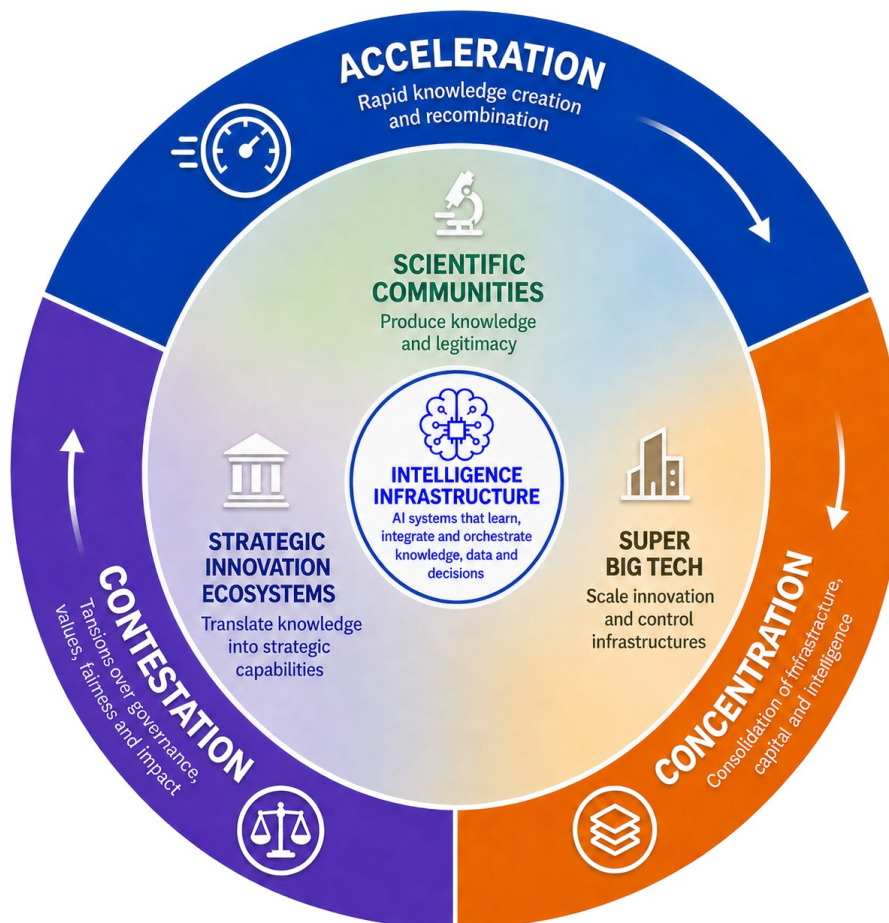
Contestation

Growing discontent spreads across society.

It becomes ever harder to tell what is trustworthy, as AI floods research with synthetic output faster than its claims can be checked against slower, real-world evidence.

The gap widens between those whose work AI strengthens and those it leaves behind. As AI increasingly shapes how people think, worries about manipulation grow — prompting new protections such as “cognitive rights.”

Rival regulatory models — market-driven, state-led, and rights-based — coexist and compete.



The dynamics and layers of the global Science, Technology and Innovation landscape in 2040

Where research careers come under pressure

1. Workforce stratification with no bridge

Access to large-scale AI compute and experimental infrastructure splits researchers into frontier, integrated and peripheral tiers. A small agenda-setting elite pulls away from a growing precariat whose work is increasingly automatable.

2. Capture of research value

Value from the publicly produced knowledge that trains the AI platforms is captured by their private holders. Little flows back to researchers, and there are no rules on rights in AI training or on benefit-sharing.

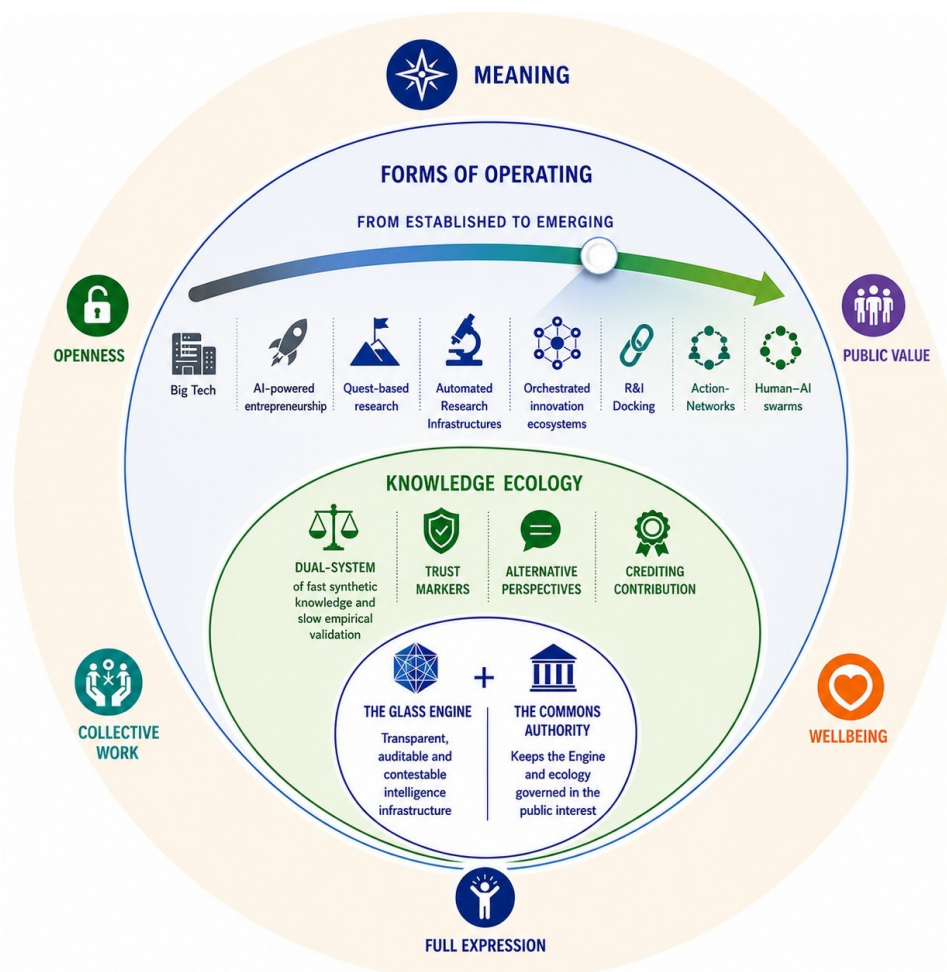
3. AI gatekeeping of visibility and credibility

AI increasingly filters what becomes visible, fundable and strategic. Overproduction and algorithmic ranking erode publishing as a marker of quality, with no governance of these new gatekeepers.

4. Lagging recognition and valuation of work

Hands-on empirical work is undervalued against fast AI output. New roles — validators, reviewers, overseers — carry little status. With large teams, automated systems and distributed workflows, credit is hard to attribute in the familiar ways.

The aspirational scenario assumes the same dynamics as the context scenario — acceleration, concentration and contestation — but channels them toward public value. Built on four layers, its architecture is best read from the centre of the diagram outward.



Living Knowledge 2040 — the four-layer architecture

THE CORE

The Glass Engine

Advanced AI that Europe builds and runs as civic infrastructure: a transparent, publicly governed system that can be audited and challenged. It is used for discovery, validation, prioritisation and collective sense-making — reasoning over a rights-cleared, provenance-tracked public corpus.

The Commons Authority

Keeps the Glass Engine and the wider knowledge ecology governed in the public interest — the institutional guarantor that the system stays open, accountable and oriented toward collective value. It also offers sealed workspaces for pre-competitive and pre-publication work, so firms and researchers can build on the public corpus in confidence.

THE KNOWLEDGE ECOLOGY — KEEPING IT TRUSTWORTHY, PLURAL AND FAIRLY VALUED

Dual system

Fast synthetic knowledge and slow empirical validation are both first-class, so experimental and field work is not devalued.

Trust markers

Credibility rests on whether a claim can be traced and checked, not on the journal it appears in.

Alternative perspectives

Dissenting and plural viewpoints are actively surfaced as a check on AI-driven convergence.

Crediting contribution

Collective and formerly invisible work — curation, validation, mentoring, negative results — is recognised and rewarded.

The “Living Knowledge” system is shaped by new forms of operating, with careers moving among them.

Human-AI swarms — groups of people and AI systems reasoning together at high intensity around problems too large for individuals or conventional teams. The high-bandwidth group — not the individual grant-holder — is the unit resourced and recognised; members collaborate rather than compete for credit, while the swarm competes outwardly. New roles (facilitator, dissent curator, sense-maker, AI-orchestration steward) and dedicated funding make them work.

Action-Networks — the public-action route through which knowledge becomes public value. They close the “action gap” by placing research, the investment that funds deployment and the regulators that authorise it inside a single feedback loop, so evidence, money and rules move together.

R&I docking — lets broader categories of knowledge producers join research and innovation projects without the usual barriers of PhD, affiliation or privileged access. Those who dock bring practical, situated experience — a field engineer, a designer, a clinician, a local knowledge holder. The threshold is lowered, not removed: participation is granted on capability and relevance.

Orchestrated innovation ecosystems — the upgraded form of today’s state-led ecosystems, sharpened by AI-supported coordination and organised around competitiveness. They align universities, firms, infrastructures and agencies to build strategic capabilities in critical domains, with coordination running on the transparent Glass Engine.

Automated research infrastructures — compute, large-scale data and automated (“self-driving”) laboratories run as public utilities. Access is allocated by scientific priority rather than ability to pay, with paid private lanes alongside.

Quest-based research — protected space for curiosity-driven, long-range inquiry — even when its pay-off is distant or uncertain — with its own guaranteed share of compute and funding, shielded from short-term, market-driven priorities.

AI-powered entrepreneurship — the entrepreneurial route to capitalising knowledge: results carried to market as spin-offs and ventures in which researchers retain a stake, channelling commercial energy without surrendering public-interest goals.

Big Tech — still powerful, but no longer the actor that defines the system. It operates under open standards, data-portability and procurement rules that keep its platforms interoperable and contestable.

THE ETHOS — THE VALUES THE SYSTEM SERVES

WELLBEING

Financial security, mental wellbeing and a sense of community — the system judged by its ability to sustain people, not just their output.

COLLECTIVE WORK

Contribution judged not only by individual outputs but by the ability to strengthen a group’s learning, coordination and problem-solving.

PUBLIC VALUE

Value from public knowledge flows back to its contributors. Researchers and communities keep rights over its use, including in AI training.

OPENNESS

The ability to contribute, regardless of geography, institutional affiliation or career stage.

MEANING

Work tied to a larger purpose: people see how it connects to wider missions and shared challenges — with protected space for curiosity-driven inquiry.

FULL EXPRESSION

The singular person valued for what cannot be standardised.

Deliberately ambitious but not utopian. The aspirational scenario takes the global dynamics as given and shows how the right governance and values could turn the intelligence infrastructure toward a living, public-interest knowledge ecology.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project “**The Futures of Researchers’ Careers: What Challenges for EU Policy?**” is funded by the European Commission — Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) under the Foresight on Demand framework contract. **Project coordination:** Visionary Analytics. **Scenario development task lead:** Institutul de Prospectiva. **Advisory Board:** Adrian Curaj, Efi Geronymaki, Gareth O’Neill, Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, and Karen Vandeveld. Publication of the scenarios: June 2026.

More about the project and its results: futures4europe.eu

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