



Early career social science researchers: experiences and support needs

A short research study of the experiences of early career researchers:
support for postdoctoral researchers from research organisations,
funding bodies and career services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Aim and objectives of the research

The aim of this research study was to gain an insight into the diversity of roles, opportunities and support available for early career researchers (ECRs) in the social sciences whether they currently work in the higher education sector or not.

The main objectives of the research were to:

- assess the range of experiences and circumstances of ECRs in the social sciences after completing their PhD;
- identify and assess the type and quality of support provided for ECRs, from a variety of sources, and identify good practice;
- identify the common career trajectories for ECRs in the social sciences and develop an understanding of any disparities between their career aims, expectations and reality; and
- review funding opportunities available to ECRs in the social sciences.

A definition of early career researchers was not prescribed and respondents were free to define themselves as such when deciding whether to respond to the survey. One of the challenges of the study was that the data on the total population of early-career social scientists is incomplete and their profile can only be guessed. Furthermore, it was not possible to estimate the proportion of the total population of doctoral graduates in the UK working inside and outside HE that would describe themselves as early career researchers in the social sciences, and therefore would have been potential respondents. For these reasons, the study participants cannot be assumed to be representative of the total national population of early career researchers in the social sciences, and so all findings reported here are necessarily qualified.

Method

The study consisted of:

- an online survey of over 1,000 early career researchers
- 35 follow-up Skype and telephone interviews with survey respondents
- 9 in-person and Skype interviews with experts

This mixed approach also drew on evidence from previous studies to inform the study design and triangulate the results.

The first phase of the study (August to November 2015) consisted of an online survey of PhD graduates in the social sciences who described themselves as early career researchers. 1,048 usable responses were received, of which 31% were male and 68% female; 61% identified themselves as British Nationals, 24% as Other European and 15% as Non-European. Respondents ranged from 23 years to 71 years, with a mean age of 36 and a modal age of 35, with

the majority in their thirties. From what we know about those obtaining doctorates in the social sciences in the UK, this suggests an over-representation of women in our sample.

The second phase of research (November to December 2015) built on the findings from the online survey and consisted of interviews with a selection of the survey respondents (46% of respondents had agreed to participate in this follow-up). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 respondents, including 18 females and 17 males, who had studied at a range of types of universities with different funding sources. Eight were working outside academia at the time of the interviews. Age, nationality and discipline of study were also criteria used in constructing the sample, in order to cover the range of possible respondents, but not to be representative of the (unknown) characteristics of the total population.

Following these interviews with survey respondents, interviews were also held with nine representatives of relevant research and other organisations, experts and individuals with a stake in the support and progression of early career researchers in the social sciences. These explored the main issues raised by respondents to the survey and the 35 interviewees, the effectiveness of existing sources of support, and ideas for improvement. A list of these 'experts' is included in the report.

The research design and methodology is described in more detail on Appendix 1 to the full report.

Key Findings

1. The experiences and career trajectories of early career social scientists

Key findings from the survey included the following:

- Most frequent reasons given for studying for a doctorate:
 - an interest in the subject (32%)
 - improving career prospects specifically for an academic/research career (26%)
 - because it felt like a natural step (21%)
- Most frequent career aspirations at the time of the survey (n.b. respondents could choose more than one option)
 - to take up a career in higher education, primarily in the area of research and teaching (55.7%)
 - a research-only career in higher education (35.0%)
 - a research career outside of higher education (18.6%)
 - a higher education teaching-only career (6.0%)
- Time taken after the doctorate to obtain their first paid employment:
 - 35% had been appointed before they had completed their studies
 - overall three-quarters (76%) of all respondents had secured their first paid appointment three months after submitting their thesis

- Current position of those working in HE (89% of survey respondents):
 - the majority (52%) had both research and teaching responsibilities, and the majority of these (79%) were on permanent contracts
 - 41% had primarily research roles, of which 82% were on fixed-term contracts
 - 7% had primarily teaching roles
 - 14% held two or more contracts at the time of the survey (including different roles at the same institution)
- Compared with the respondents to a similar survey of arts and humanities ECRs (Renfrew & Green, 2014), the social sciences respondents working in HE were more likely to be on permanent contracts at the time of the survey (51.4% social sciences compared with 30.7% arts and humanities)

The survey respondents (in their open text responses) and interviewees described a wide diversity of experiences and career trajectories for doctoral graduates, such that it was not possible to discern common career trajectories. Many felt they had taken a unique and 'non-traditional' route to where they are now, indicating there is an enduring perception of a traditional, linear path into academia, whether or not this has ever been the experience of the majority of ECRs in the social sciences.

2. The type and quality of support provided for early career social scientists

Survey respondents and interviewees were asked about the support available to them during and after their doctoral study. Overall, the survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their doctoral studies proved effective training for their current employment (86%) and for their desired employment (83%). Apart from supervision and basic institutional provision, such as an institutional email address and access to library facilities, they also reported they had received the following types of support during their doctoral study:

- Access to training (77%)
- Office space (77%)
- Funding for conferences (72%)
- Careers service (39%)
- Support for funding applications (29%)
- Mentor (26%)
- Funding for publication fees (15%)
- More female respondents (21%) than males (13%) mentioned a mentor as the most helpful/valuable type of support
- Those who had been awarded their doctorate within the last three years were more likely to mention the careers service (42%, compared with 37% of those four or more years after) and a mentor (28%, compared with 23% of those four or more years after) as the most helpful/valuable type of support
- Those who had been in receipt of doctoral funding from the ESRC were more likely to mention the careers service (44%)

and less likely to mention a mentor (20%) than respondents with funding from other sources (39%-27%)

Respondents remarked on the important role played by individuals, such as their supervisor and other academic colleagues, in their preparation for employment after doctoral study. However, there were many who were critical of the level and type of institutional support on offer. Where it was available, this tended to be for a limited duration, which might not even have included the period for 'writing up' a thesis. Or the support may not have been available remotely, if the doctoral student had to move away (including back to their home). More female respondents (41%) than males (26%) reported encountering difficulties in accessing support, advice and guidance.

Many survey respondents (in their open text responses) and interviewees commented on the need to develop a more realistic understanding and accurate portrayal of the difficulties of forging an academic career. Some felt that, if they had known this, they would have given more consideration to career opportunities outside academia from the start. However, many referred to an assumption by doctoral supervisors and other academics that a career outside academia following doctoral study is a failure. Many participants in the study also wanted continued affiliation to their doctoral institution beyond their registration as a student, for example, as an associate.

A variety of support was available to survey respondents and interviewees in their current academic institution if they were employed. The most praised of these included:

- a full training programme appropriate to the individual's career stage and needs
- discipline-specific departmental training and seminars
- being allocated a mentor
- funding to attend conferences and other networking opportunities
- small grants for developing teaching
- the chance to take a postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in higher education or academic practice.

However, study participants reported variations in the time available to them to take up some of these opportunities.

Those working outside academia were less likely to have a structured support and training programme specifically aimed at the post-doctoral level or time to access one, if it existed. Some had found that support, advice and guidance from national research funders appeared to be 'off-limits' to those working outside academia.

3. Funding opportunities and their impact

Funding opportunities available to ECRs in the social sciences are rather limited in range compared with the physical and natural sciences. However, in some social science subjects,

e.g. psychology, it is not unusual for applications to be made to related research councils (e.g. the Medical Research Council and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council) especially as part of larger multi-disciplinary projects. The key schemes are:

- ESRC Future Research Leaders Scheme
- British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship
- British Academy and Royal Society's Newton International Fellowship Scheme
- Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowships
- Wellcome Trust Research Fellowships (Humanities and Social Science)
- Small-scale schemes offered by individual UK universities

None of the national schemes cover the full economic costs (FECs) of the fellowship or research, with the Leverhulme Trust being notable for requiring 50% funding from the host institution. In total, these schemes provide fewer than 100 ECR positions each year.

One-quarter (25%) of the survey respondents reported not having submitted any applications for postdoctoral funding, and 42% of all respondents reported having at least one application for funding for postdoctoral work funded. However, this could have included small amounts of institutional funding, for example, for conferences and open access publications.

Over half the respondents (in their open text responses) and many interviewees felt there were barriers to applying for funding, either at the national level, in the rules and criteria of funding organisations, or at the institutional level, in the lack of advice and support and as a result of institutional efforts to limit the number of unsuccessful applications for external funding. There were many comments about the length and complexity of the application process and the low chances of success. 21% of the survey respondents highlighted the requirement to be on an open-ended contract (i.e. 'faculty' or 'permanent' academic staff) before being allowed – by the funder and/or the institution – to submit research grant proposals.

Another common refrain was the raising of the funding threshold, such that small grants were no longer available for modest research proposals. Many respondents (in their open text responses) and interviewees felt that the Future Research Leaders (FRL) funding was not appropriate for early career researchers, being too large scale and complicated for their needs. They called for the reinstatement of one-year postdoctoral fellowships and small scale funding to be made available for those in a wide range of employment situations.

Survey respondents were more likely to have been successful in applying for funding for postdoctoral research, if their doctoral institution was Oxbridge (47.4%) or an international university (45.5%) than another Russell Group university (35.5%) or other UK HEI (32.3%).

4. Survey respondents' and interviewees' suggestions for improvement

Participants in the study were very forthcoming in offering suggestions and detailed ideas for doctoral institutions, current employers and research funders.

The key areas they sought support for during their doctoral studies were:

- preparing applications for research funding in a highly competitive environment
- publishing in high quality journals
- networking with academic and policy communities
- accurate and realistic information about the academic labour market
- help with preparing CVs, job searches and applications
- information, advice and guidance about work outside academia, and
- the development of transferable skills (such as team working, communications and problem-solving).

The key areas they sought support for once employed in an academic role were:

- more and better feedback on applications for research funding, and increased opportunities for redrafting and resubmission
- tackling issues related to teaching, such as student recruitment, assessment of students' work, enhancing students' employability, and interpreting NSS results and other metrics (such as those proposed for the Teaching Excellence Framework)
- managing the limited time available for research, writing and publishing
- training in research methods beyond their own specialism, and
- managing research projects and teams.

Interviewees wanted to see more and better data published by the ESRC on the profiles of successful funding applicants, especially to the FRL scheme.

Discussion and conclusions

The survey and interviews present a snapshot at a particular point in time which will, however, be a useful baseline against which to compare future developments. Given the findings from this study, perhaps we should avoid thinking of early career researchers as a homogenous group pursuing a traditional linear path from undergraduate and masters study through postgraduate research, a post-doctoral position and into full-time permanent employment as a lecturer in higher education. Indeed, the inability to follow a linear path into academia seemed to be the source of considerable disappointment and frustration among participants. Moreover, the findings from this study suggest the need for broader definitions of 'early career researcher' that are not solely based

on the time elapsed since the award of a doctorate, but also on the competence and expertise of the researcher. Nearly a half (48%) of the survey respondents had been awarded their doctorate four or more years previously and nearly a quarter (24%) six or more years previously. The achievement of a permanent academic position was mentioned by respondents but, as this could increasingly be in a teaching-focused role, even this is not sufficient as a marker in a research career. It would seem that successful experience as a principal investigator of an externally- (i.e. not university-) funded research project could be the significant factor that marks the transition from 'early' to 'mid'-career as a researcher (although, perhaps not yet 'senior'). A previous study of early career researchers in the arts and humanities similarly argued for a broader definition of 'early career researcher' (Renfrew & Green, 2014).

The ESRC uses its investment in DTCs – and the Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) in future – to raise the standards of postgraduate training. Its 2015 Postgraduate Training Guidelines set out what will be expected and, to be accredited, a DTP will have to demonstrate it meets these expectations, and its performance will be monitored. The guidelines cover broader employability and transferrable skills training and the need for a robust training needs analysis. The evidence from this study suggests these efforts should be extended to include careers information, advice and guidance, and to extend this to cover those recently awarded doctorates.

On the basis of the findings from this study and the foregoing discussion and conclusions, we offer the following recommendations. The rationale and evidence for these are explained in more detail in the full report.

Recommendations

For the ESRC:

1. Doctoral Training Centres and their successors, Doctoral Training Partnerships, should continue to play the leading role in developing, training and supporting early career researchers, both within their own institutions and through partnerships with other higher education institutions.
2. To build on the ESRC Postgraduate Training Guidelines and establish an ESRC doctoral 'quality mark' which embodies a code of best practice for doctoral institutions in supporting their doctoral students and those to whom they have recently awarded doctorates. The ESRC should encourage other Research Councils to consider adopting a similar scheme.
3. Where funding for a post in an HEI is from a Research Council, details of the planned provisional continuing professional development should be required in the proposal, personalised once an individual is appointed and subject to monitoring at completion of the award period.
4. To provide smaller-scale funding for early career researchers

through a less time-consuming proposal process than the Future Research Leaders (FRL) scheme offers.

For other higher education sector bodies in the UK, such as Vitae:

5. To provide online information, advice and resources on professional development and careers for those doctoral graduates currently working outside higher education who may wish to work (or return to working) in academia.
6. As part of their Researcher Development Framework, Vitae to identify a set of observable attributes and skills that would mark the transition from early to mid-career researcher in the social sciences (and, potentially, other disciplinary areas).

For universities with significant numbers of social science doctoral students:

7. To provide initial preparation and continuing training and support for all doctoral supervisors, including briefing and online information on the opportunities and support available for doctoral students to teach, publish, apply for research funding, network, enhance their employability and access careers information, advice and guidance.
8. To monitor the outcomes of internal decision-making about research funding by gender, ethnicity and age (for example, for small grants, internal-demand management, etc) and, where skewed, to take action, e.g. actively encouraging women and BME staff to apply, and enabling leading female and BME academics to provide guidance, etc.
9. To meet the ESRC's 'quality mark' for the provision of support for doctoral students and recent doctoral graduates. For the latter, these facilities to be available for a minimum of three years and, preferably, five years after the award of their doctorate.
10. It is not sufficient to simply make available training for doctoral students early in their studies, focusing on the skills and attributes needed in the work place – both within and outside the academy. This needs to be informed by a training needs analysis undertaken initially as part of the doctoral application, and updated at least annually throughout the period of study to seek to maximise the uptake of this training.

For universities as employers of doctoral graduates:

11. To provide a structured career development programme, regular appraisals and support for objective setting to be available to all early career academics. Where funding for a post is from a Research Council, details of the planned provisional continuing professional development to be included in the application, updated once an individual is appointed and subject to monitoring at completion of the award period.

12. To ensure that opportunities for continuing professional development should be made more available to those researchers employed on part-time and fixed-term academic contracts, and to recognise that not all early career researchers are currently in research roles.

References

Renfrew, K. & Green, H. (2014) Support for Arts and Humanities Researchers Post-PhD, London and Swindon: British Academy and Arts and Humanities Research Council.
