



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy



Scoping the current system
of support for early career
researchers in Ireland

Introduction

In 2018, the Royal Irish Academy convened a working group to undertake a scoping project to provide a snapshot of the perceptions and experiences of early career researchers (ECRs) in higher education institutions (HEIs) on the island of Ireland. Through focus groups conducted in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Academy explored the views and experiences of ECRs from several HEIs and disciplines. The qualitative data gathered provides rich detail and context to the experiences of ECRs on the island of Ireland.ⁱ

For the purpose of this paper, an Early Career Researcher is defined as someone who has been awarded a PhD in the previous seven years.

It has become more difficult to define an academic in the early stages of their career.ⁱⁱ The increasingly casualised nature of academic work means that the definitions of ECRs that institutions use are often outdated and fail to reflect the lived experiences of this cohort of researchers.ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout Europe, and to an extent worldwide, the term ECR is however generally used when referring to a researcher who has obtained a doctorate in the previous 5-8 years (sometimes including doctoral candidates).

This scoping paper provides a snapshot of the views of ECRs working in Irish HEIs and their experiences of current systems of support.

Rationale: The higher education sector in Ireland has, in recent years, experienced significant budget cuts, a reduction in the number of opportunities for permanent academic contracts and a growing reliance on low-paid, part-time, temporary staff for teaching and research roles.^{iv} However, higher education in Ireland is under-researched, especially compared to primary level and post-primary level, and with a few exceptions 'there has been virtually no research conducted on issues surrounding the crisis and their impact on higher education'.^v Anecdotal evidence suggests that the current cohort of ECRs face more challenging conditions than previous generations but these challenges are poorly understood.

Despite extensive reach out by the Working Group, the study was not able to determine with certainty the exact population size of ECRs in Ireland or Northern Ireland, the discipline spread of ECRs or male:female ratios. It is striking that even with the increased and welcomed set of national actions in support of ECRs it is not yet possible to determine the size of the relevant population. Ongoing efforts by the HEIs and funding agencies north, and south, to address this lacuna are to be welcomed.

Innovation 2020, Ireland's five-year strategy for research, development and innovation, contains a number of ambitious goals directly relevant to this cohort, namely: to address gaps in the funding system for postdoctoral researchers; to ensure continued opportunities for researcher career development in areas of strategic importance; and to develop a coherent national policy on structured progression for researchers, and to ensure support for PhD and postdoctoral researchers.^{vi}

ECR PIPELINE IN NORTHERN IRELAND: SUMMARY OVERVIEW



2,215

students were enrolled in doctoral research in 2016/17^{vii}

58.3%

of students graduating from HEIs are female^{viii}

50:50

ratio of female: male doctorate enrollments^{ix}



DOCTORATE GRADUATES IN NORTHERN IRELAND (2016/2017):

480

students obtained a doctorate^x (increase from 450 in 2015/16^{xi} and 430 in 2014/15)^{xii}

68.8%

of graduates are in full-time employment (79.8% male, and 60.2% female)^{xiii}

69.2%

are employed in Northern Ireland (15.4% in GB, and 8.3% in Ireland)^{xiv}

45.5%

earn £30,000-£34,999 (51% of males, and 38.5% of females)^{xv}



Female graduates are more likely (35.9%) to earn over £35,000, compared to men (24.5%)^{xvi}



Northern Ireland Sources: Higher Education Statistics Agency & Statistics & Research Branch (Tertiary Education), Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

ECR PIPELINE IN IRELAND: SUMMARY OVERVIEW

86%

of the 8,357 doctorate enrolments for 2016/17 are in the university sector^{xvii}

51.5% of doctorate graduates in 2016 were female^{xviii} and **52%** of doctorate enrolments for 2016/17 were female^{xix}



DOCTORATE GRADUATES IN IRELAND (2016):

67%

are in employment in Ireland^{xx}

17%

are in employment overseas^{xxi}

41%

are working in higher education in Ireland or abroad^{xxii}

33%

are employed in the Dublin region^{xxiii}

57%

earn €25,000-€45,000^{xxiv}

There is some evidence that males earn slightly higher salaries than females, nine months after graduation^{xxv}

What the literature tells us about ECRs

The growing body of literature on the experiences of ECRs tells us:

- ECRs constitute the most vulnerable group in the researcher ecosystem.^{xxvi}
- Many ECRs struggle to balance the conduct of academic work with chasing other career possibilities during and after the completion of a PhD.^{xxvii}
- Postdoctoral researchers are typically employed on a series of temporary contracts until they are promoted to tenured positions.^{xxviii}
- Insecure working conditions, isolation, insufficient supervision and mentoring, and excessive teaching loads are frequently identified as challenges, while good and careful supervision, mentoring, networking, and a relatively uninterrupted research focus are reported as being positive influences.^{xxix}
- Grant writing and the pursuit of funding opportunities are a key area of stress and consequent distraction from the academic careers of ECRs.^{xxx}
- Mentoring is perhaps the most effective form of support for novice university lecturers' professional development and learning, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and increase confidence, self-esteem and professional growth.^{xxxi}

Focus group interview data

Participants had very different experiences in terms of the support they received in their institutions across varying career stages. The availability of high quality support varied considerably and such support was often of an informal nature:

Even though people were really nice there was no approach from anybody to kind of guide me and tell me what programmes I could access and things like getting teaching courses and things like that, nobody came in...you really had to batter at people and say 'Look there must be supports for postdocs. What do you do? How do you get to open them? How do you open the doors to get to them?'

The most commonly reported support came in the form of supportive professional relationships that participants had individually established with more experienced colleagues:

For me there is my probation mentor which is a formal position, but I think most of the support I have received isn't really in that guise, he is a more senior academic within our department who kind of guides new people when they come in and my former PhD supervisor as well continues to provide support informally.

Not all participants had teaching duties in their HEIs, but there was unanimous agreement that teaching and research were not perceived as being of equal value in academia:

There does seem to be more emphasis placed on research as being more valuable than teaching.

Those who were employed solely for research purposes were concerned about not being assigned any teaching duties and the implications this might have on their career development:

It is a concern because if I go to compete I don't have the teaching experience that my colleagues would have for instance.

Those who had both teaching and research duties felt overwhelmed with what they felt was an unsustainable workload. Despite their teaching workloads, there was still an expectation of them to conduct and produce research. The participants felt that maintaining a commitment to research can be difficult in these circumstances however:

You have to spend all your time teaching and then you are meant to do all the research at the weekend.

Participants were highly aware of the need to compete for and secure research funding as an ECR. Funding opportunities were communicated to ECRs more effectively in some institutions, or disciplines, than others. Some institutions effectively communicated the availability of funding opportunities and in some cases, guidance was provided. Other participants were critical of the lack of communication around researching funding:

We have an official research support office that nobody really knows about and what they do is they send us an email on funding... and then you have the office studies that technically take care of early career research and they don't really do that either because they focus at PhD level but they don't do the after. So, you need to look for information on your own.

Participants cited time as being the greatest challenge they face in securing funding. In some cases, 'time' referred to the consuming duration it took to apply for funding, while in other cases it referred to the length of the funding:

It is short term...everything is short term. So if you are finding after four months of working that the funding is for two years and after one year you already had started the funding for the next year and that takes away the time for you to put in your own research, which is actually a waste of money then I think because I mean you have to put your time into that already after a year.

Two common issues emerged in the feedback from the focus groups regarding the actual funding application and selection process. The first issue was a perception that the grant application and selection process was often somewhat arbitrary:

I have no idea why I win grants and why I lose them. I have no idea. Because my writing style and my ability hasn't changed between grants and I will get one that I maybe think I should have got and I will lose one that I thought was strong. I will ask for feedback. I will get maybe two or three lines. I have zero idea why. So even in success I don't particularly know why it's worked.

The second issue, which provoked a greater sense of frustration, was related to the lack of security and recognition provided to ECRs, and especially postdoctoral researchers, even after acquiring funding:

I think if you are in a postdoc position it's even more difficult because as you said if you are not a permanent member of staff you can't go on as PI (Principal Investigator) or Co-I (Co-Investigator) on their grant application forms but then...so you have no security or you have no guarantee from your institution that if they do secure this you will have a position so you are trying to chase follow on...so as soon as you get a job you are basically looking for the next one because you don't know where you are going to be... You can't be the named person on it and you don't have a guarantee of an institution so you can't really apply for them.

Job insecurity and the highly uncertain nature of job and research funding applications were frequently identified as causes of stress for ECRs. Participants identified stark financial challenges and predicaments. This meant that it was common for ECRs to have stressful personal lives and difficult lifestyles:

I am kind of really struggling...to live my life and know that I am going to be able to pay my mortgage in a years' time.

It was common for the participants to have spent their 'twenties on very low academic pay', something that they were accepting of, but now in their thirties and still finding themselves in similar circumstances, many felt aggrieved:

I mean this was all really fun in my twenties, but I am going to be 35 this year, I don't want to be a nomad anymore.

The need to be highly mobile to pursue a research career was also a concern for some because it meant that they did not have an opportunity to put down roots in either an institution or locality. For example, one participant reported having to move location 'eight times in the last three years', and another pointed out that ECRs 'should know which continent' they will 'be on next year'. This challenging and stressful situation also led to frustrations about family commitments:

You think money is so low at the moment and it puts such stress on my partner and then I'm thinking if we are going to have children, when are we going to have children? Are we going to drag them around Europe looking for different positions? What kind of life is that to live?

Throughout the interviews, only one male participant made reference to his gender. He said:

It has gone in my favour a lot of times, but like in a kind of visible way. People treating me with more respect than I would anticipate from them.

In each focus group however, references were made to difficult experiences which were attributed to gender, by female participants. For example, one participant felt that it is ‘very difficult’ to secure a job in her field ‘if you are a woman who hasn’t gone to X (high-status international university)’. Another participant in this focus group supported the view that women did not secure employment to the same extent as men:

I mean pretty much when we were postdoc the first time I think all the postdocs were women with one exception. We used to joke is it because the men all have jobs or is it because the men have all left and we are the ones who are sticking at it and persevering and banging against the wall?

Three participants, all in the same focus group, reported experiences of inappropriate workplace behaviour:

That is where being female came in because certain senior lecturers and some professors were like ‘Let’s go for a drink and discuss this, about how you could possibly do a lecture for me’ and it was kind of like ‘I can’t do that’. You can’t do that as a woman and would you have actually said that to a man?...So, I had to not follow up on certain opportunities because of that kind of attitude, which is just so archaic and frustrating, and then they talk about all these consent lectures and classes that they are going to enforce for incoming students and they don’t give anything to the older lecturers who are just too antiquated and so it’s quite frustrating.

As is evident from the data presented above, the conversation in each focus group often centred on the negative experiences and challenges experienced as an ECR. One participant captured the atmosphere in each focus group by referring to the group discussion as being like a ‘self-help group’. Despite the negative feedback on their experiences however, and participants were very clear in highlighting their challenging contexts, the majority of participants also wanted to point out that there are positives too – and it is these positives that help them persevere. For example:

I love my research and I love the flexibility and actually I think it’s quite creative research. So, I really love it. I am not sure if I could do anything else. I might have to, but I wouldn’t really want to.

I love my job and I love my research and that is why I put up with all these other things. So as much as I complain and can’t stand and get to this time of the year in particular where I am tearing my hair out I really enjoy going to work. I could never work 9 to 5 in a cubicle. So, when it boils down to it I literally can’t imagine doing anything else.

I have to do battle...but I love it. I love my job, the freedom of it, the creativity of it, the risk of it as well, the sort of high stakes of it...I am continually learning. It’s fantastic. Otherwise I wouldn’t have stayed.

It’s an interesting job. I have nearly written my resignation letter a few times but what keeps me here is its interesting and I work with good people and the flexibility is great.

I enjoy my work massively. I teach when I want to teach, and I research when I want to research.

Most days of the year I wake up and think what am I going to do today? And there is nobody telling me what that is. You can’t beat that.

Method

Four focus groups took place in three different locations across the island of Ireland; two in the Republic of Ireland and one in Northern Ireland. The 35 participants, 13 males and 22 females, came from a total of 11 different institutions. To recruit participants, recent recipients of the Royal Irish Academy’s Charlemont Grants Scheme (i.e. those awarded in 2015/16, 2016/17, and 2017/18), a high-impact travel grants scheme aimed at early-career postdoctoral researchers, were contacted and invited to participate with 11 agreeing to do so. HEI research offices also facilitated the research by sharing information on the research as did senior faculty. Participation in this research was on a voluntary and opt-in basis. All participants gave informed consent to participate and they remain anonymous throughout this research.

Emerging initiatives

Of particular note is the recent publication of the Review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, a revised version of the 2008 edition signed by all major organisations involved in research training in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, with the objective of supporting the career development of all individuals with a role in carrying out research. Interestingly, it acknowledges the need for improved data collection and tracking to better understand UK researcher careers. Similarly, the forthcoming Irish Researcher Career Development and Employment Framework is expected to have a strong competence development component to provide postdoctoral researchers with the skills necessary to advance their careers both within and outside of academia.

Membership of RIA Early Career Researcher Support Working Group

- Professor Daniel Carey MRIA
- Professor Patrick Guiry MRIA
- Ms Jane Maher, Trinity College Dublin
- Professor John Morison MRIA (Chair)
- Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, University College Dublin
- Professor Brian Norton MRIA
- Mr Craig Skerritt, RIA.

For more information on this scoping project please contact the Policy and International Relations Unit at policy@ria.ie

References

- i This is a small-scale study with a small sample size. The research was also spread across two jurisdictions with ECRs from various disciplines. The findings are not generalisable or definitive.
- ii Matthews, K. E., Lodge, J. M., & Bosanquet, A. (2014). Early career academic perceptions, attitudes and professional development activities: questioning the teaching and research gap to further academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(2), 112-124.
- iii Bosanquet, A., Mailey, A., Matthews, K. E., & Lodge, J. M. (2017). Redefining 'early career' in academia: a collective narrative approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(5), 890-902.
- iv Courtois, A. D. M., & O'Keefe, T. (2015). Precarity in the ivory cage: Neoliberalism and casualisation of work in the Irish higher education sector. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 13(1), 43-66.
- v Hazelkorn, E. (2014). Rebooting Irish higher education: policy challenges for challenging times. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1343-1354, pp.1351.
- vi Government of Ireland. (2015). *Innovation 2020: Excellence Talent Impact*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- vii Retrieved from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's 'Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2016/17 - Student numbers and characteristics' webpage: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2018/sfr247-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>
- viii Retrieved from the Department for the Economy's 'Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2016/17' webpage: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualifications-gained-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201617>
- ix Information provided on request by Statistics & Research Branch (Tertiary Education), Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.
- x Retrieved from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's 'Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2016/17' webpage: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualifications-gained-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201617>
- xi Retrieved from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's 'Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2015/16' webpage: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualifications-gained-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201516>
- xii Retrieved from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's 'Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2014/15' webpage: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualifications-gained-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201415>
- xiii Information provided on request by Statistics & Research Branch (Tertiary Education), Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.
- xiv Information provided on request by Statistics & Research Branch (Tertiary Education), Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Higher Education Authority. (2018). *Higher Education Factsheet: Postgraduate Research*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xviii Retrieved from the Higher Education Authority's 'Access our Statistics' webpage: <http://hea.ie/statistics-archive/>
- xix Higher Education Authority. (2018). *Higher Education Factsheet: Postgraduate Research*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xx Higher Education Authority. (2018). *Higher Education Factsheet: Postgraduate Research*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xxi Ibid.
- xxii Ibid.
- xxiii Higher Education Authority. (2018). *What Do Graduates Do? The Class of 2016*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xxiv Higher Education Authority. (2018). *Higher Education Factsheet: Postgraduate Research*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xxv Higher Education Authority. (2018). *What Do Graduates Do? The Class of 2016*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- xxvi Laudel, G., & Gläser, J. (2008). From apprentice to colleague: The metamorphosis of early career researchers. *Higher Education*, 55(3), 387-406.
- xxvii McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2015). Early career researcher challenges: substantive and methods-based insights. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37(1), 1-17.
- xxviii van der Weijden, I., Teelken, C., de Boer, M., & Drost, M. (2016). Career satisfaction of postdoctoral researchers in relation to their expectations for the future. *Higher Education*, 72(1), 25-40.
- xxix Wöhrer, V. (2014). To stay or to go? Narratives of early-stage sociologists about persisting in academia. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(4), 469-487.
- xxx See for example Enright, B., & Facer, K. (2017). Developing Reflexive identities through collaborative, interdisciplinary and precarious work: the experience of early career researchers. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15(5), 621-634.
- xxxi Remmik, M., Karm, M., Haamer, A., & Lepp, L. (2011). Early-career academics' learning in academic communities. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 187-199



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

