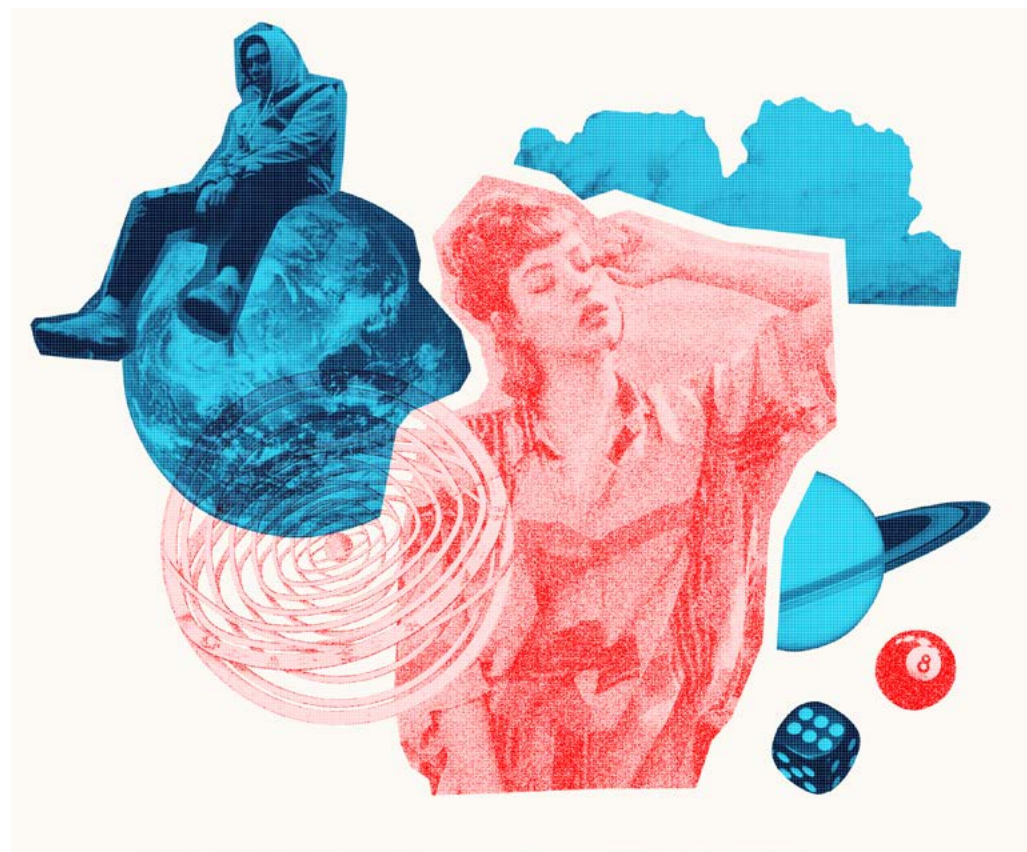


What **barriers** do precarious academics encounter in the development of their ethical leadership?



Time scarcity

Time is often insufficient to complete paid responsibilities, let alone leadership, networking, writing or support work.

Contractual insecurity

The normalisation of precarious contracts makes longer-term ethical practice difficult and emotionally demanding.

Work beyond contract

This is a systemic norm, especially where participants care about students, colleagues, or future prospects.

Lack of permission to focus on development

Researchers struggle to find time for their own development beyond the immediate demands of the project.

Intersecting challenges

These barriers can intersect with financial circumstances, visa status, caring responsibilities, and wider life decisions, generating greater precarity and uncertainty in academics' lives.

Lack of concrete access to opportunities

This is especially relevant for publication, grant-writing, conferences, and career development.

Weakly structured support

Leadership development and mentoring support is often optional, too generic, or dependent on goodwill.

Competition and atomisation

These undermine solidarity and collegiality, making ethical actions harder.

Lack of recognition and visibility

Precarious researchers' contributions often remain informal or invisible.

About this document

This document summarises the findings from the 2025-26 research project 'Ethical Leadership Amid Precarity', funded by the Wellcome Trust via InFrame. Project team: Enrico Galvagni, Jen Ross, Yuemiao Ma, Simon McGrath, Joanna Royle, Nicola Cuthbert, Cécile Ménard. Graphic design: Elspeth Maxwell.

The project involved 28 participants in precarious academic positions from The Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, who contributed to in-depth interviews and focus groups exploring their conceptualisations of ethical leadership, the challenges they encounter in precarious roles, and their support needs.

What is Ethical Leadership? A Guide for PIs and Managers

Generosity

- Share opportunities of publication, grant application, conference organising, mentoring, networks, etc. with precarious colleagues.
- Allocate protected time and resources where possible, so opportunities do not become unpaid labour.

Responsibility

- Be proactive and take responsibility for supporting the career development of precarious academics within your team.
- Clarify expectations and boundaries, including what is and is not part of the role.
- Give appropriate recognition and credit, such as first authorship on a paper they lead.

Practising ethical leadership in your role can support precarious academics in their development of leadership attributes.



Empowerment

- Advocate for clearer institutional accountability and fair access to development opportunities, funding, mentoring, and recognition.
- Raise issues of inconsistent policies, exclusionary criteria, etc. with departments and institutions.
- Challenge assumptions that commitment should be demonstrated through unpaid labour or working beyond contract.

Care

- Initiate regular conversations with precarious researchers to understand what support would enhance their career development.
- Listen to precarious colleagues around what ethical support involves in precarious contexts.
- Take time to get to know colleagues on precarious contracts.

Adaptability

- Avoid assuming that the same forms of support are effective for everyone.
- Offer tailored career development support, rather than adopting a generic approach.
- Be receptive to good practices shared by others and, where appropriate, incorporate them into your management and leadership approach.