

# Supporting Early Career Researchers during/after Covid

Draft, ART R&I Early Career Researchers Group

## Introduction

This document sets out a series of measures to address the challenges faced by early-career researchers (ECRs) created by Covid-19. The University has a strong track record of investing in ECRs through recruitment, training and support. This focus is more important than ever, given the particular challenges ECRs face in sustaining research activity and building research careers as a result of the pandemic. Through the approach set out in this paper, we aim to position UoE as a sector leader in addressing the challenges facing ECRs.

The pandemic poses a range of challenges for ECRs, including impediments to sustaining research activity during lockdown, and an uncertain academic job market. There is growing evidence that nursery and school closures are having particularly pronounced effects on female researchers.<sup>1</sup> According to the University Working from Home Survey, almost three quarters of academic staff with caring responsibilities have found that Covid has negatively impacted their ability to conduct research. Challenges with balancing childcare with work appear to be especially acute for those at grades 8 and 9: for example, 41% of grade 8 staff have found their ability to balance work and childcare negatively affected. Those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds may face heightened challenges in a context of home working and job insecurity. And we should be attentive to the additional challenges for ECRs from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (BAME), who may experience structural racism in various aspects of recruitment, support and career development.<sup>2</sup>

These challenges are arising against the backdrop of a major rethink of how the HEI sector supports research staff and ECRs. The revised Research Development Concordat, the Russell Group Research Culture and Environment Project, and the Wellcome Trust initiative on research culture, are all converging around a number of key principles: the crucial role of a supportive and inclusive research environment which actively supports career development; promoting and rewarding a wider range of skills and activities within research careers, including transition across sectors; and providing more secure employment for research staff in host institutions.

This document identifies a range of responses to these challenges (summarized in the table below), including adapting existing schemes and services and creating new initiatives in many areas of research support. It also calls for wider discussions about precarity, both within UoE and in the wider HEI sector. Effective delivery of this approach requires mobilising a variety of professional support services, straddling the institute for Academic Development (IAD), Edinburgh Research Office (ERO), Human Resources (HR), Information Services, and School/Deanery and Centre-based services. Crucially, it necessitates commitment and investment from senior colleagues across the University who line manage, supervise and mentor ECRs.

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis from [Digital Science](#) reported in the THE found the proportion of female first authors in 60,000 journals fell over 2% in April 2020 and 7% in May, to 26.8%; similar results were reported in [Nature News](#). Both studies point out that given the lead-in time to submission, the proportion is likely to fall further for subsequent months.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the 2019 [UCEA report](#) on ethnicity and gender disparities in academic salaries.

## Scope

We define ECRs broadly, to include both (a) fixed term research staff (research assistants, postdoctoral fellows), and (b) staff on tenure-track and open-ended contracts (lecturers, Chancellor's Fellows). ECRs are typically defined as within 7 years of being awarded their PhD, though this may be longer for those who have taken career breaks or parental leave, or have had limited opportunity to conduct research. They tend to be employed at grade 7, 8 or early 9.

While ECRs in both categories face overlapping challenges in terms of research activity in the immediate term, those on fixed term contracts face additional pressures in terms of career development, job insecurity and future employment, and it is this group that is the main focus of this document.

## Summary of Measures

Challenge	Approach	Specific Measure	Owner/Status (RAG)
Data Collection	Adapt methods	DDI resources	DDI programme/ART Data Group – in progress
		SERCH (Supporting Research During Covid Hub)	CAHSS – complete
	Prioritise access to data	Access to labs/buildings	ART R&I Group, Heads of School/Deanery – in progress
		Re-start face-to-face data collection	Ethics/Health & Safety guidance – completed 17 <sup>th</sup> July
	Pause research	Temporary redeployment	Line managers – in progress
Caring Responsibilities	Mitigation & compensation	Record disruption	Line managers – in progress
		Prioritise for research support	Schools/Deaneries, line managers – in progress
		Standardised statement in CV/promotion materials	ART ECR Group Chair, University EDI Lead – to be developed
Poor home working environment	Enhance home working conditions	Guidance on home working, access to equipment	ART Home Working Guidance - complete
	Access to campus offices	Bookable spaces on campus	ART Estates Group – in progress
Networking & Collaboration	Guidance on digital events/collaborations	SERCH	ERO KEI Team – complete
	Institutional partnerships	Virtual visiting fellowships & mentoring schemes	ARG ECR Group Chair, Ed Global, SRS – in progress
Well-being	Resilience support	Pop-up IAD resources	IAD - complete
	Mental health and well-being support	Online services	Health & Safety, HR – complete
	Mentoring	Ensure Concordat mentoring requirements are met	Line managers – in progress
New staff	Induction	Online induction and meetings	Line managers, PIs – in progress
	Mentoring	Ensure appropriate mentoring	Line managers, PIs – in progress
Career development	Postdoctoral funding	Enhanced support for key postdoctoral/ECR schemes	ERO, College Deans of Research – to be developed
	Career support	Academic Talent Strategy	ERO – in progress
		Industry engagement support	Edinburgh Innovations – in progress
		Career development support	IAD resources - complete
ECR employment	Promote job security	Continued implementation of anti-casualisation agreement	Colleges and HR in liaison with the unions – in progress
		Promote open-ended contracts where possible	Colleges and Schools /Deaneries – in progress

## 1. Immediate Challenges for ECRs

### *Accessing facilities, equipment and data*

Many ECRs will be unable to proceed with research as planned, because of impediments to data collection and analysis. Whilst UKRI and Wellcome have offered limited funds to cover grant extensions, most other funders, including the EU and many charities, have indicated they will not grant cost extensions (see [ERO guidance](#)). Thus many fixed term staff face the prospect of coming to the end of their contract without adequate time to complete their project.

The priority for ECRs in this situation will be to adapt research, where possible, to complete projects using digital/on-line tools and methods.

- Colleges and Schools/Institutes are developing resources to support digital and 'remote' methods and methods training. These include: (1) Digital Research Services one-stop, developed by the DDI programme; and (2) the [SERCH resource \(Supporting Research During Covid Hub\)](#), launched in June as a collaboration between CAHSS, IAD and ERO.
- Line managers, PIs and mentors should actively support and guide ECR colleagues in making use of these resources in a way that best suits the researcher's project and career trajectory. We would strongly encourage colleagues to view such adaptation as a positive opportunity to broaden researcher skills, particularly in relation to DDI and digital methods.

Where such adjustment to research design is not possible and research is reliant on access to facilities/equipment on campus, the needs of these early career colleagues should be prioritized in decisions on access to labs/facilities (see ART R&I paper on Restarting Research).

- In order to implement this, Schools/Centres should ascertain how critical such access is to completion of the project and the career development of the ECR; this prioritization should be factored into general decisions on access (see Annex 2).

Where neither of these options is feasible, Schools and other units could consider whether a member of staff on a fixed term contract unable to continue research might be interested in an alternative role for a short period of time (see Annex 1).

### *Caring responsibilities and poor home working environments*

Many ECRs have caring responsibilities which are impeding their ability to carry out research. Findings from the recent Working from Home Survey (WFHS) show that across all staff in the University, 24.5% of staff have found it difficult to balance work with childcare. Those with caring responsibilities are more likely to have been negatively affected by working from home, compared to those without such responsibilities. Thus academic staff with caring commitments have reported a negative impact on working hours (71.9% of those with caring responsibilities experiencing a negative impact, compared to 50.6% without such responsibilities); work-life balance (70.7% compared to 58.3%), ability to conduct research (73.7% compared to 67.7%); as well as experiencing higher levels of tiredness and stress compared to other staff.

In terms of career stage, the WFHS found that academic staff at grades 8 and 9 have found it most difficult to balance work with childcare (respectively, 41.1% and 48.3% finding working from home had a negative impact on balancing work and childcare, compared with just 10.2% at grade 7 and 28% at Grade 10).

- Those with caring responsibilities should be prioritized for access to research support (see Annex 2).
- The University plans to use a portion of the Scottish Funding Council block grant funding to

develop a research support programme targeting colleagues whose research has been particularly affected by Covid, with an emphasis on EDI. The programme, developed by ERO and the Colleges, will include supplementary support for preparing bids, networking, developing non-academic engagement skills, and research career development.

- Those whose research has been adversely affected due to health or caring responsibilities should have the opportunity to clearly indicate this and have it recognized in annual review and promotion materials (see section 2 below).

Fixed-term research staff may lack adequate home-working environments, including access to appropriate office equipment, furniture, or wi-fi. The WFH Survey found that 73.4% of staff on fixed term contracts found that working from home had a negative effect on their office equipment. This may be especially challenging for those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. For staff facing these constraints, it will be important that they have access to offices/hot-desks on campus, as lockdown begins to ease.

- Staff with inadequate home working environments should be prioritized for access to offices or hot-desks on campus (see also Restarting Research paper).
- Staff should be alerted to University advice and guidance on safe home working (see Staff Home and Remote Working paper)

#### *Networking and collaboration*

ECRs are especially dependent on travel for conferences, networking, visits and talks in order to establish contacts and skills to build their careers. It is likely that such activity will be constrained for some time. Moreover, the University is keen to encourage a sustainable approach to air travel as a longer-term goal, in line with the recently adopted policy on air travel. This is a good time to explore ways of enabling such exchange through digital channels.

- The University is rolling out guidance on various tools for digital exchange, including events, dissemination and public engagement ([SERCH](#)).
- Together with Social Responsibility and Sustainability and Edinburgh Global, the College Research Deans are exploring embedding a virtual visiting fellow and mentorship exchange scheme as part of our international partnerships.

#### *Well-being and mental health*

Because of lockdown, many ECRs may experience problems with isolation, low motivation, anxiety and other mental health issues. This may be exacerbated for those on fixed-term contracts who are anxious about their future employment prospects, and especially those whose wider families/networks are experiencing economic hardship. The WFHS found that 53.6% of academic staff on fixed term contracts and 69.6% of those on guaranteed hours contracts found their motivation negatively affected by working from home, compared to 43.3% on open-ended.

- Line managers and mentors should ensure ECRs are aware of existing resources on mental health and wellbeing, including through the Health & Safety and HR Learning & Development websites. Staff should be directed to online [Staff Counselling](#) services where relevant.
- The Institute for Academic Development (IAD) has developed a '[pop-up IAD](#)' for researchers that addresses issues around productivity and resilience, and is working in partnership with other Russell Group institutions to develop a career conversation guide for research staff and their mentors or advisers.
- Schools/Centres should closely implement the Concordat requirement of allocating to all research staff a mentor distinct from their line manager/PI.

### *New ECRs joining the University*

In addition to the challenges faced by existing staff, the current restrictions will affect staff moving to Edinburgh to start new positions. In addition to the challenges above, such incoming staff will face additional issues, which may include:

- National/ International travel restrictions preventing them from moving to Edinburgh
  - Finding accommodation in Edinburgh for themselves/ their families
  - Finding childcare for pre-school and school-age children
  - Access to University, building and laboratory inductions
  - Restrictions on meeting new colleagues
  - Restricted access to offices/ labs/ libraries
- PIs and line managers should put in place processes to assist the relocation of all new staff, including ECRs, and their integration into the centre/subject area/group. This should include online induction, online meeting/introduction sessions and, where possible, pre-arrival buddying.
- Plans for the start of the new post should include contingencies for dealing with delayed access to the lab or office (where relevant) and, when access to the lab is possible, for dealing with social distancing.

Given the range of challenges faced by ECRs, we are committed to ensuring they receive support for their research. Annex 2 sets out guidance for line managers in allocating research support to ECRs, in particular linked to concerns about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

## **2. Career Development and Employment**

Covid-19 is already having a pronounced effect on HEI and industry recruitment, and we can anticipate a slowdown and/or volatility in the job market for ECRs over the coming years as Universities, companies and other employers adapt to the financial and other impacts of the pandemic.

This is likely to exacerbate the existing career challenges faced by ECRs. Many ECRs find themselves having to take on a succession of short-term and often opportunistic employment posts, whilst trying to build relevant skills and experience with the aim of securing a permanent academic post. There are a range of measures the University can take to supporting ECRs in achieving their career goals.

### *Postdoctoral Funding*

Research staff (ECRs and/or those leading such research grant applications) should be able to access robust support for postdoctoral grant applications. This will be provided through the following.

- ERO, Colleges and Schools will identify priority schemes which are key in supporting research careers, and adopt rigorous processes for selecting and supporting applicants. This should build on existing good practice in Colleges, such as CMVM's Edinburgh scientific academic track training. Relevant schemes may include individual fellowships such as UKRI Future Leadership Fellowships and other research council schemes, Leverhulme and Wellcome ECR fellowships; or they may involve ECRs taking the lead in distinct elements of a major research programme or project. Such schemes may be relevant for existing staff, and/or for external applicants (noting

that Schools/Centres may want to prioritise named internal candidates with demonstrated skills and experience where funding rules allow). Colleges will work with their Schools/Centres to identify which types of schemes and candidates to prioritise, especially where the scheme involves an institutional contribution and/or employment commitment beyond the period of funding.

- ERO is rolling out an Academic Talent Strategy for Research Funding, which includes support for Aspiring Investigators and New Investigators. Support will include events and webinars, planning tools and resources to support application development. As noted above, ERO and the College Deans of Research plan to develop a supplementary support programme funded by the SFC block grant, targeting colleagues whose research has been particularly affected by Covid, with an emphasis on EDI.
- Complementing this service, Schools/Centres should offer tailored support and guidance for individual ECRs to identify and develop competitive proposals, including through mentoring or a grant buddy/critical friend.
- To guide these approaches, ERO and the College Deans will develop guidance on prioritizing and supporting ECR schemes, and cascade this guidance through Schools and College Research Committees.

### *Employability*

Given uncertainty over the future employment market, particular attention should be given to the development of skills and experiences to equip ECRs for both academic *and* non-academic careers. It should be noted that the distinction between academic and other sector skills requirements is blurring, with research careers typically also involving innovation and impact activities, and industrial careers often involving aspects of research, innovation and teaching/training. We should therefore ensure that a breadth of employability/career development support is available to ECRs at School/College/University level.

- Edinburgh Innovations (EI) offers a range of resources on industry engagement, business development, and enterprise support for staff on its [staff website](#).
- In addition, EI Business Development experts, embedded in Schools and Colleges as first points of contact, can support ECRs seeking further support and advice on industry engagement. They can help explore options, provide practical help at every stage and introduce EI's range of professional expertise as necessary.
- ECR staff should be directed to [IAD resources on career development](#), which include career workshops, consultations and other resources.
- Line managers and mentors may want to advise and support ECRs in gaining broader experience of teaching, if this is relevant to their career goals.
- IAD will be working with College HR to ensure that updated guidance on ECR career development is integrated into Annual Review documentation, as part of Phase 3 of the new HR system (2021).

### *UoE Employment Practices*

The University can also contribute to addressing these challenges through University recruitment and employment practices. Wherever possible, the University should seek to create open-ended and tenure-track contracts for more senior ECRs; while rolling out more comprehensive support for research staff.

- In 2019 the University committed to taking forward a set of agreed actions aimed at providing

greater employment security for those on casual contracts, and for the fair management of staff employed on fixed term contracts. The University is committed to producing clear guidance for staff on fixed term contracts. This guidance, which is currently being developed, will draw on the good practice set out in the recently published UK Concordat to support the career development of researchers. HR are leading this work and will consult with the ART ECR group and others to ensure the needs of ECRs are fully understood.

- IAD and the HR contracts group has launched a discussion on 'career researcher' tracks for long-term staff who do not transition into a PI or academic path. Colleges and Schools/Centres are encouraged to identify areas where there is ongoing demand for research staff skills within funded research teams, and thus a business case for converting posts to open-ended contracts.
- More generally, Colleges and Schools/Centres are encouraged to prioritise open-ended over fixed-term contracts, in areas where they have ongoing teaching needs and/or areas for strategic investment in research.
- Schools with short-term teaching needs should also consider career development fellowships involving a mix of teaching and research, alongside comprehensive support for skills/career development and employability.
- The College Deans will launch a dialogue with Schools/Centres to explore how this approach can be taken forward in their particular contexts.

UoE should fully recognize the impact of lockdown in its approach to the recruitment, selection and appointment of research staff.

- Recruiters should be encouraged to explore the impact of Covid-19 on the research outputs of the candidates.
- The University should also make it easy for candidates to clearly identify and highlight restrictions on their capacity to research (as they do with phases of maternity or parental leave). The ART ECR Chair will work with the University EDI Lead to develop and publicise a template for this, to ensure that candidates and University staff are not penalized for Covid impacts.

A summary of these measures and approaches will be discussed and consulted on with the trade unions in July, and with ECR colleagues through a series of local feedback sessions in Colleges in August/September 2020.

### **ART R&I ECR Group members**

Christina Boswell, Dean of Research, CAHSS (Chair)  
Steven Barnes, Head of HR, CSE  
Catherine Burns, Deputy Director, ERO  
Charles ffrench Constant, Dean of Research, CMVM  
Paddy Hadoke, Biomedical Sciences  
Antony Maciocia, Dean of PG, CSE  
Andy Mount, Dean of Research, CSE  
Jonathan Seckl, Senior Vice-Principal  
Sara Shinton, Deputy Director, IAD  
Ellen Stewart, Chancellor's Fellow, Usher Institute  
Stephen Wallace, UKRI FLF, Biological Sciences

## **Annex 1: Supporting staff redeployment**

Where an early career researcher is unable to continue with their research because of impediments to data collection/analysis, line managers may want to explore whether the staff member is interested in a short-term redeployment. The following offers brief guidance from HR to line managers on how to go about this. Please contact your local HR office/advisor for more details.

1. Schools and other units should discuss with these members of staff whether they would be willing to be temporarily redeployed either fully or partially to provide support needed elsewhere. A good example of this would include helping to prepare teaching materials for on-line delivery. These could be developmental opportunities, for example to gain experience of preparing teaching materials or lecturing. Grant funding should allow for such breaks, but PIs would be responsible for checking the precise terms and conditions.
2. If the redeployment is for a short period of time, then all terms and conditions would remain unchanged, but the school would need to determine and agree how the salary costs are re-charged prior to the redeployment commencing. It is also assumed that the redeployment occurs within existing contracted working hours. PIs would need to sign off such redeployment as well as a plan for project restarts and application for a no-cost extension to the grant if required.
3. If the re-deployment is for a longer period of time then it should be considered more formally as an internal secondment (in line with the University Policy on Secondments) and advertised as such. This would require a graded job description for the seconded post, a selection process and a secondment agreement for the successful candidate. This will also ensure that the secondee is paid at the right grade for the post. In these cases it is incumbent on the host unit to ensure that they are able to fund the secondment and in all cases the School/Deanery/Centre should ensure that adequate training is provided.

## **Annex 2: Research Support for ECRs**

Heads of School/Deanery and line managers should be guided by the following process in identifying needs and allocating support for ECRs.

### **1. Identify who is affected**

Schools and MVM Centres have already started to gather data on how staff are affected by lockdown, through a range of methods – annual review and one-to-one meetings, questionnaires to staff via email, or surveys. Whatever method is chosen, managers should seek to understand, at a minimum:

- The type of impediments ECRs face to carrying out research – be these related to data collection, caring responsibilities, home working environment, networking or well-being. Staff should not be required to share personal information about their domestic arrangements, but could be asked to indicate which (combination) of these factors is most relevant.
- How far these are affecting research. Staff could be asked to indicate (a) the extent to which their research is/has been restricted; and/or (b) the number of hours they are able to dedicate to research per week. This will change quite rapidly as physical distancing measures are eased, so line managers will need to be flexible in how they collect and action this information.

The request for information should be presented in a constructive and supportive way, to avoid any suggestion that it will be used to penalize staff. The purpose of gathering such information is, on the contrary, to identify how staff may be supported in their research going forwards. This data should remain confidential and used by the staff member and their line manager to develop individual solutions. Line managers should be able to highlight the main themes and impact levels arising from their conversation without compromising confidentiality.

### **2. Identify the type of support for ECR support that is appropriate**

Research support in this context may cover:

1. Training, mentoring and career guidance
  2. Internal seed funding (available in some Schools or through schemes such as SFC GCRF internal seed funding)
  3. Enhanced support for grant and fellowship applications (e.g. through mentoring or additional peer review)
  4. Access to labs, offices or facilities where this is restricted
  5. Research time in workload allocation (relevant for CAHSS)
  6. Research leave (where applicable)
- Managers are strongly encouraged to ensure these types of research support are provided to ECRs, including, where relevant, to those on fixed term research contracts.
  - Availability of these kinds of support should be clearly communicated to research staff, including ensuring there is a named colleague in the relevant School/Deanery/central research office who can support them to pursue suitable early career fellowship and grant

opportunities.

3. Ensure the criteria and processes for allocating resources are transparent and fair

You should set out clearly the principles guiding allocation. For example, in allocating additional research time in workload allocation, or enhanced support for grant applications, you might want to foreground:

- research support for ECRs at critical junctures in their research career;
- where possible, prioritizing support for those whose circumstances have resulted in more restricted research time (e.g. because of caring responsibilities);
- clearly, these considerations will need to be balanced with strategic goals for your School/Centre, such as prioritizing particular areas of research and innovation.

Any sensitive decisions (for example on seed funding, research leave or workload allocation) should follow a clear and transparent process, involving someone with ECR and/or EDI responsibility and HR where appropriate.

Special attention should be given to any unconscious bias in decision-making, especially in relation to women, BAME researchers, and those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

To complement this individual-level data, we will draw on data on ECRs and impediments to research from the Home Working survey.