

UK-HyRES National Early Career Researcher Survey Report: What needs to change?

UK-HyRES ECR NETWORK
OCTOBER 2026

Author: Sibimol Luke,
Research Fellow in Hydrogen Technology Innovation

Executive Summary

DOMINANT FINDING

Job insecurity, short-term contracts and unclear career pathways are the dominant concerns affecting retention and career progression.

This survey received responses from post-PhD early career researchers, primarily postdoctoral researchers, with some research staff, lecturers, and early-career faculty working across UK universities and research institutions. The findings indicate that job insecurity, short-term contracts, limited permanent research opportunities, funding uncertainty, and unclear career pathways are the dominant concerns affecting retention and career progression.

Respondent Profile

Survey respondents are post-PhD researchers from a diverse range of UK higher education institutions, including Russell Group, other pre-1992, and post-1992 universities, and research organisations reflecting a broad cross-section of the UK academic community.

Most respondents were postdoctoral researchers, with additional participation from research staff, lecturers and early-career faculty.



■ Postdoctoral researchers (79%) ■ Lecturers / Early Faculty (14%) ■ Research staff (7%)

Respondents came from a wide range of disciplines, with strong representation in engineering and the physical sciences and a smaller presence in social science research. However, most of their research focuses on energy and net-zero.

Researchers were funded through UKRI projects, mixed-funding arrangements, industry-funded projects, university funding, and Leverhulme funding. UKRI-funded researchers formed the largest group. The sample included both UK and international researchers, with a substantial proportion of respondents identifying as international, highlighting the importance of global talent within the UK research system. Findings represent self-reported experiences and may not be representative of all UK ECRs.

Key Findings

- Job security and contract stability emerged as the most significant challenge.
- Funding availability and access to grants were major concerns. Funding structures are perceived as highly competitive, restrictive, and often inaccessible to ECRs.
- Many researchers reported pressure to publish and secure funding while lacking long-term stability.
- A large proportion of respondents have considered leaving academia, with many seriously considering alternative careers.

- International researchers face additional barriers relating to visas, immigration costs, family mobility, and eligibility restrictions.
- Researchers report a lack of transparent career progression pathways and insufficient institutional support. It is often viewed as unclear and poorly defined.
- Many respondents value research highly but feel the current system makes long-term research careers unsustainable.

Major Challenges in Detail

Job security and short-term contracts

This was the most consistently reported challenge across the dataset.

Common concerns included:

- Reliance on fixed-term contracts
- Time diverted from research and continuous need to search for future employment
- Inability to plan personal or family life or make long-term commitments
- Reduced ability to focus on research due to contract uncertainty
- Limited permanent research positions
- Financial insecurity and difficulty obtaining mortgages

“

You can't really focus on doing your best work when you're constantly worried about your contract ending.

“

I cannot plan my life when I have to go from contract to contract.

“

There are very few permanent research opportunities.

Funding availability

Funding emerged as the second major issue.

Researchers highlighted:

- Limited funding opportunities
- Excessive competition
- Short-term project funding
- Fellowship eligibility restrictions
- Internal institutional gatekeeping
- Lack of funding schemes specifically targeted at ECRs
- Low success rates for fellowships and grants

Several respondents noted that funding uncertainty directly contributes to job insecurity. Several respondents felt that universities act as a barrier through internal selection processes that stop ECRs accessing external opportunities. Many ECRs felt that success increasingly depends on navigating institutional processes rather than on research quality alone, and it causes frustration.

Career progression and pathways

Many respondents reported unclear or poorly defined career pathways.

Examples included:

- Lack of transparent promotion or progression routes
- Uncertainty regarding progression from postdoc to independent researcher
- Limited research-only career pathways
- Heavy dependence on individual supervisors
- Lack of long-term planning support

“

There is no progression pathway, and this exacerbates anxiety.

“

Feel lost with no clear pathway.

Grant pressure and research culture

Many ECRs described pressure to:

- Publish rapidly
- Write grants and secure funding early
- Supervise students
- Demonstrate independence
- Build an academic profile and network while fulfilling project obligations

They described this as a paradox, as they often lack permanent employment, budgetary control, direct access to funding, and recognition of leadership contributions. Several respondents noted being expected to work independently while remaining dependent on the PI's funding portfolio. They also highlighted that extensive grant writing reduces the time available for actual research, with very little probability of winning a grant.

Respondents reported strong pressure to publish, with publications often perceived as the primary measure of academic success and career progression, while other contributions are insufficiently valued. Many felt that current evaluation practices place insufficient value on other important contributions, including conference presentations, technical expertise, project delivery, teaching, leadership, knowledge exchange, collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and broader research experience. Several respondents argued that an overemphasis on publication metrics can disadvantage researchers who make significant contributions that are not reflected solely through publication outputs.

Retention Risks

73%

of respondents reported considering leaving academia

The leading drivers were:

- Job insecurities
- Limited career progression
- Salary concerns
- Work-life balance concerns
- Lack of recognition and support
- Better opportunities and salaries outside academia

Very few respondents reported having no concerns about remaining in academia. Notably, very few respondents cited lack of interest in research.

Mentorship and Development

Respondents valued mentorship, leadership opportunities and networking, but experiences varied considerably.

Positive experiences included:

- Supportive supervisors
- Access to leadership opportunities
- Conference participation
- Industry collaboration

However, many reported:

- Lack of independent mentoring
- Limited career conversations
- Insufficient protected development time
- Unequal access to leadership opportunities

Some respondents noted career development depended almost entirely on the quality and engagement of individual supervisors. Relying on a manager means that, where supervisory support is limited, researchers may miss out on funding opportunities, fellowship calls, training programmes, networking events, and other forms of career development support. This can lead to unequal access to opportunities across research groups and create disparities in career progression. Respondents therefore suggested that schools and departments communicate key opportunities directly to ECRs and postdoctoral researchers, reducing reliance on individual supervisors and ensuring more equitable access to information and support.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Several themes emerged in this topic. A major one is caring responsibilities. Respondents reported difficulties balancing family commitments and career progression. Women particularly noted challenges relating to maternity and career progression.

Another major theme that emerged is transparency and fairness. Respondents raised concerns regarding:

- Perceived favouritism
- Lack of transparent recruitment processes
- Internal funding selection procedures
- Unequal access to opportunities

Transparency and merit-based decision-making emerged as recurring recommendations.

International Researcher Perspectives

International researchers faced additional challenges beyond those experienced by UK-based colleagues. International researchers highlighted visa costs, immigration uncertainty, cultural barriers and restrictions on mobility. These issues often compounded concerns about short-term employment. Short contracts create visa insecurity. Researchers highlighted that a 1–2-year contract may not provide sufficient stability to build a long-term career in the UK.

Visa costs

Researchers reported concerns about visa renewals, NHS surcharges, and the costs of Indefinite Leave to Remain. These were often described as major financial burdens.

Career mobility

- Dependency on employer sponsorship
- Restricted mobility between institutions
- Family and dependent considerations
- Difficulty planning long-term careers

Several respondents stated that visa insecurity affected decisions about remaining in UK research. Short-term contracts create a double precarity for international researchers because employment insecurity is directly linked to immigration status.

Cultural and language barriers

- Building professional networks
- Participating confidently in networking events
- Understanding institutional culture and other cultural differences
- Informal language and communication barriers

Other Insights

Some respondents said that support depends too heavily on the individual PI, though experiences varied dramatically. Researchers with supportive supervisors reported better mentoring, leadership opportunities and

greater confidence, while others described minimal support, limited guidance and a lack of career conversations. This suggests that institutional structures are not consistently supporting ECR development.

KEY INSIGHT

Researchers are not primarily asking for more training courses. Instead, they want leadership opportunities, authorship opportunities, industry engagement, grant-writing experience, access to funding, and research independence.

Research culture matters. Several respondents highlighted lack of transparency, perceived favouritism, poor communication, and limited recognition. Researchers repeatedly called for fairness, transparency, and merit-based progression, and many feel their valuable contributions are not recognised.

What Would Encourage Researchers to Stay?

Across responses, five dominant recommendations emerged.

1	Improve job security Longer contracts, bridging funding between projects, permanent research-focused roles and clear transition routes from postdoc to permanent positions.
2	Reform funding structures More ECR-targeted funding, reduced institutional gatekeeping and greater access to smaller grants and simplified application processes.
3	Strengthen career development Clear career development plans, regular career conversations, independent mentoring and structured support for fellowships and funding applications.
4	Enhance academia-industry mobility Secondment opportunities, industry placements, collaborative research programmes, and easier movement between academia and industry.
5	Better support for international researchers Visa cost support, more flexible eligibility criteria, longer-term employment options and improved advice and guidance.

What Works Well?

Despite the challenges identified throughout the survey, respondents highlighted several positive aspects of their research careers and working environments. Many expressed a strong passion for research and a continued commitment to advancing science and technology, suggesting that concerns about staying in academia are largely driven by structural barriers rather than by a loss of interest in research itself.

Researchers consistently valued supportive supervisors who offered mentorship, constructive feedback, career guidance, and access to professional development. Positive supervisory relationships were often linked to greater confidence, stronger career progression, and improved access to leadership and networking opportunities.

Leadership opportunities were widely regarded as beneficial, particularly when researchers were given responsibility for supervising students, leading activities, managing collaborations, or contributing to strategic decision-making. Respondents described these experiences as important for developing independence and for preparing for future career progression.

Industry engagement and collaboration were also viewed positively. Researchers valued opportunities to work with industry partners, participate in collaborative projects, and gain exposure to non-academic environments. These experiences were seen as enhancing skills development, broadening career prospects, and increasing the real-world impact of research.

These findings suggest that although significant structural challenges remain, there are clear examples of effective practice that could be scaled across institutions. Strengthening mentorship, expanding leadership opportunities, supporting research independence, and promoting academia-industry engagement may help improve researcher satisfaction, career development, and long-term retention.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the survey evidence, the strongest recommendations are:

For Funders and Government

- Increase investment in ECR-focused funding schemes to support researchers in establishing independence, developing research leadership, and building competitiveness for larger grants and fellowships.
- Implement bridging funding mechanisms that reduce career precarity, support continuity of employment, and retain talented researchers between successive grants or contracts.
- Review eligibility criteria for fellowships and research funding to ensure they are proportionate, transparent, and inclusive of diverse career pathways while maintaining high standards of research excellence.
- Expand opportunities for academia-industry secondments and cross-sector mobility programmes to support career development, strengthen collaboration, and enhance the societal and economic impact of research.
- Promote longer-term investment in research careers through funding and policy frameworks that provide greater stability and reduce dependence on successive short-term contracts.
- Expand permanent research career pathways to provide sustainable alternatives to traditional academic progression routes and recognise research-focused careers as a valued component of the research ecosystem.
- Review visa costs and immigration processes for researchers to ensure the UK remains attractive, accessible, and internationally competitive in recruiting and retaining global research talent.
- Promote responsible research assessment practices that reduce overreliance on publication metrics and recognise the full range of contributions made by researchers.

For Universities

- Establish structured ECR career-development plans to provide clear goals, training opportunities, and support for progression throughout the researcher career pathway.
- Ensure all ECRs have access to structured annual career-development reviews to enable meaningful discussions on career aspirations, development needs, and progression opportunities beyond immediate project objectives.

- Create clearer promotion pathways by providing transparent criteria, expectations, and routes for advancement across research career stages.
- Reduce internal funding gatekeeping by increasing transparency and broadening access to institutional funding opportunities, ensuring that support is allocated fairly and based on merit.
- Implement transparent, merit-based criteria for internal funding allocations, fellowship nominations, and other competitive opportunities.
- Develop centralised communication mechanisms that provide ECRs and postdoctoral researchers with direct access to information on funding, fellowships, training, mentoring, and career-development opportunities.
- Reduce dependence on individual supervisors by establishing institution-wide support systems that provide equitable access to opportunities, resources, and career guidance.
- Adopt holistic researcher assessment approaches that value research quality, technical expertise, teaching, leadership, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and professional experience alongside publication outputs.

For Principal Investigators (PIs)

- Hold regular career development conversations to discuss career aspirations, identify development needs, and support progression within and beyond academia.
- Provide leadership opportunities by enabling ECRs to supervise students, lead work packages, manage collaborations, and contribute to strategic decision-making.
- Support fellowship development by providing mentorship, protected time, and opportunities for ECRs to develop competitive fellowship and grant applications.
- Promote research independence by encouraging ECRs to develop their own research ideas and activities, publications, collaborations, and professional networks.
- Support diverse forms of researcher development and recognise contributions beyond publications, including mentoring, leadership, teaching, collaboration, and engagement activities.

Conclusion

The survey presents a remarkably consistent picture across institutions and disciplines. While respondents remain passionate about research, many feel that the current research ecosystem is characterised by unstable employment, uncertain career pathways, intense funding competition, and insufficient long-term support. The strongest and most urgent message is the need for greater job security and clearer career progression routes for post-PhD researchers. Without addressing these structural issues, there is a significant risk of losing talented researchers from the UK research system. A particularly valuable insight from the survey is that researchers are not primarily asking for more training. Instead, they seek opportunities, stability, transparency, mentorship, and meaningful pathways to independence and long-term careers.