

LETTER

Academic careers: what do early career researchers think?

As *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* is the official journal of the Society for Social Medicine (SSM), we thought it appropriate to share some of the members' views.

ARE YOUNG RESEARCHERS GETTING A FAIR DEAL?

Early career researchers (ECRs) are often anecdotally described as facing major challenges. These challenges reportedly include lack of job security, too few opportunities to carve out their own interests, fighting to survive in competitive institutions and being perceived as resources rather than as people. These issues have attracted increasing attention in scientific circles and now also in the media.^{1–3}

In response to these concerns, the SSM ECR Subcommittee conducted an ECR members' survey in early 2015 to obtain views on a range of issues. We had 65 responses (response rate 50.7%) of whom approximately three-quarters were female, and a third were based in London.

Responses clustered around three main themes: job instability, limited opportunities to develop an academic career and lack of mentoring.

JOB INSTABILITY

Concerns about job instability are very apparent among ECR members of the SSM. Of those who responded to the question, 84% reported having unstable careers with short-term contracts. Although many members had been based at their institution for a number of years, of those who have completed their graduate training, only 8% were on a permanent contract, 30% did not expect their contract to be extended and a further 32% were not sure.

The problem of job instability applies not only to epidemiology and public health, but it also echoes similar trends in other academic disciplines in the UK and globally.^{4–5} A number of solutions have been explored in diverse countries. For example, in the USA, there are calls to extend the postdoctoral research period to 5 years to allow the development of a track record of publications. Conversely, in New Zealand, grant funding that supports postdocs has been reduced by a third,⁶ thereby severely limiting the number of postdocs.

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP AN ACADEMIC CAREER

In most institutions, academic value is measured in terms of outputs, rather than developing skills or acquiring responsibility. ECRs are often contracted to particular projects. They therefore rarely have enough time to expand their own research ideas and interests, due to the objectives, milestones and demands of their specific research project.

The survey results indicate that ECRs feel that a lot is expected of them. The majority stated that their research, teaching and administration workloads were reasonable, but nevertheless 61% often worked more than their contracted hours. Many ECRs therefore felt that they lacked the spare capacity to continue to develop their own research interests or agendas.

LACK OF MENTORING

Our survey found that 55% of ECRs did not have a mentor. Furthermore, many institutions apparently do not provide a mentoring scheme. Yet, an academic mentor can be vital in providing social support and frank discussions about career paths, strategy and progression, including suggestions for attending workshops and courses for continuing development. Furthermore, mentoring has been shown to benefit both ECRs and mentors.^{7–9}

For more details of the survey, visit <http://socsocmed.org.uk/2015/05/20/ssm-ecr-survey-results>

SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL MEDICINE

The SSM has therefore developed a number of mechanisms to support ECRs facing career challenges. We provide networking opportunities, special events, dedicated ECR workshops, a mentoring scheme and monthly emails that contain details of relevant job and funding opportunities.

<http://socsocmed.org.uk/early-career-researchers/>

The SSM is thus taking steps to improve mentoring provision and has recently piloted a within-society mentoring scheme. ECRs were paired with a senior SSM member to provide the necessary support, focusing on ECRs based in institutions where mentoring schemes are absent. The pilot scheme has proved effective and it was very well received. Currently, plans are in progress to roll this out to a full scheme, involving ECRs, middle career researchers and senior career researchers.

The SSM ECR Subcommittee was formed in 2009 with the purpose of

representing the ECR members of the society. It creates numerous opportunities for ECRs to interact with senior members of the society. For instance, it organises the 1-day ECR workshops which now occupy day 1 of the SSM Annual Scientific Meeting. In 2015, the SSM ECR workshop 'Forging a career in academia: A survival kit' included senior members speaking on topics including grant writing, publishing papers, enhancing CVs and interview skills.

We are now planning to facilitate more professional networking to foster collaborations among SSM ECRs and also to enable ECRs to work with influential and world-leading academics in the field. In September 2016, a new free preconference 1-day workshop will be organised in York for the ECRs, on the subject of funding sources and grant writing.

These initiatives demonstrate that SSM has a potentially powerful role to play in providing guidance and training to the next generation of scholars and thus enabling ECRs to progress in their careers. Other academic societies could take on similar roles. In doing so, they would provide the necessary support that often seems to be lacking. Crucially, they would be investing in tomorrow's research leaders.

This letter was endorsed by the SSM committee on 2 September 2015.

The SSM ECR Subcommittee (2015) and Professor Simon Capewell (SSM President)

Correspondence to Professor Simon Capewell, Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, University of Liverpool, The Waterhouse Building, Dover St, Liverpool, Merseyside L3 5DA, UK; Capewell@liverpool.ac.uk

Twitter Follow the SSM ECR Subcommittee at @ECR_SSM & Professor Simon Capewell at @SimonCapewell99

The SSM ECR Subcommittee Consists of: Dr Dorina Cadar (Chair), Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, London, UK; Sara Ronzi (Chair elect), Department of Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK; Dr Kathryn Oliver (Past Chair), Department of Social Policy, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; Dr Sadie Boniface, National Addiction Centre, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, London, UK; Dr Evangelia Demou, MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Hayley Denison, School of Biological Sciences, Te Kura Matauranga Koiora, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand; Dr Sarah Gibney, Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative, Department of Health, Dublin, Ireland; Dr Rebecca Lacey, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, London, UK; Dr Snehal Pinto Pereira, Institute of Child Health, University College London, London, UK; Melanie Rimmer, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. Past ECR Subcommittee member Steven Bell. <http://socsocmed.org.uk/early-career-researchers/subcommittee>

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