

Early career researchers' thoughts on academic careers: updated evidence from the Society for Social Medicine and Population Health

A 2015 Society for Social Medicine and Population Health (SSM) survey¹ of early career researchers (ECRs) highlighted several challenges faced, including job insecurity, limited academic career development opportunities, and a lack of mentorship. Based on these findings, SSM introduced ECR workshops and networking events, a mentoring scheme, and publicised job and funding opportunities. To evaluate progress on these issues, we surveyed ECR members in 2021. The survey was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and occurred alongside the UK industrial action related to academic working conditions. Key findings are highlighted in figure 1. Below, for context, we provide some comparisons with responses in 2015,¹ while recognising the limitations of drawing conclusions from repeat cross-sectional surveys.

Of 48 responses, three-quarters were female and at least one respondent came from every region of the UK and Ireland.

JOB SECURITY

Job insecurity remains high; 57% of ECRs report receiving poor pay and conditions and 80% report experiencing unstable careers with short-term contracts, suggesting little if any improvement from 2015 (84%).¹

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Although half of ECRs report limited opportunities to develop their academic careers, 68% believe that their workload reflects their personal career goals, which may suggest greater discussion of the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat.² These findings suggest an improvement on the 2015 survey, which indicated ECRs had little time to expand their own research interests and develop their career.¹

WORKLOAD

Most ECRs agree that teaching (69%) and research (67%) workload are reasonable. Despite 72% reporting to frequently work more than the contracted hours, an increase from 61% in 2015, 58% say they rarely work what they consider to be long hours.

MENTORSHIP

Only 11% report to have signed up to the SSM mentoring scheme. Furthermore, 54% report a lack of adequate institutional mentoring or support, reflective of the findings from 2015 when 55% reported to not have a mentor.¹

FUTURE PLANS

ECRs report a high interest in non-academic careers: 66% are interested in government positions and 71% in working for non-government organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of ECRs could be improved by:

1. Urgently acting and advocating at all sector levels to address workload and working conditions.
2. Prioritising well-being, for example, at SSM's pre-conference ECR days.
3. Increasing awareness of mentoring opportunities (e.g., the SSM mentoring scheme).
4. Promoting rounded professional development and skilled career opportunities in all sectors.

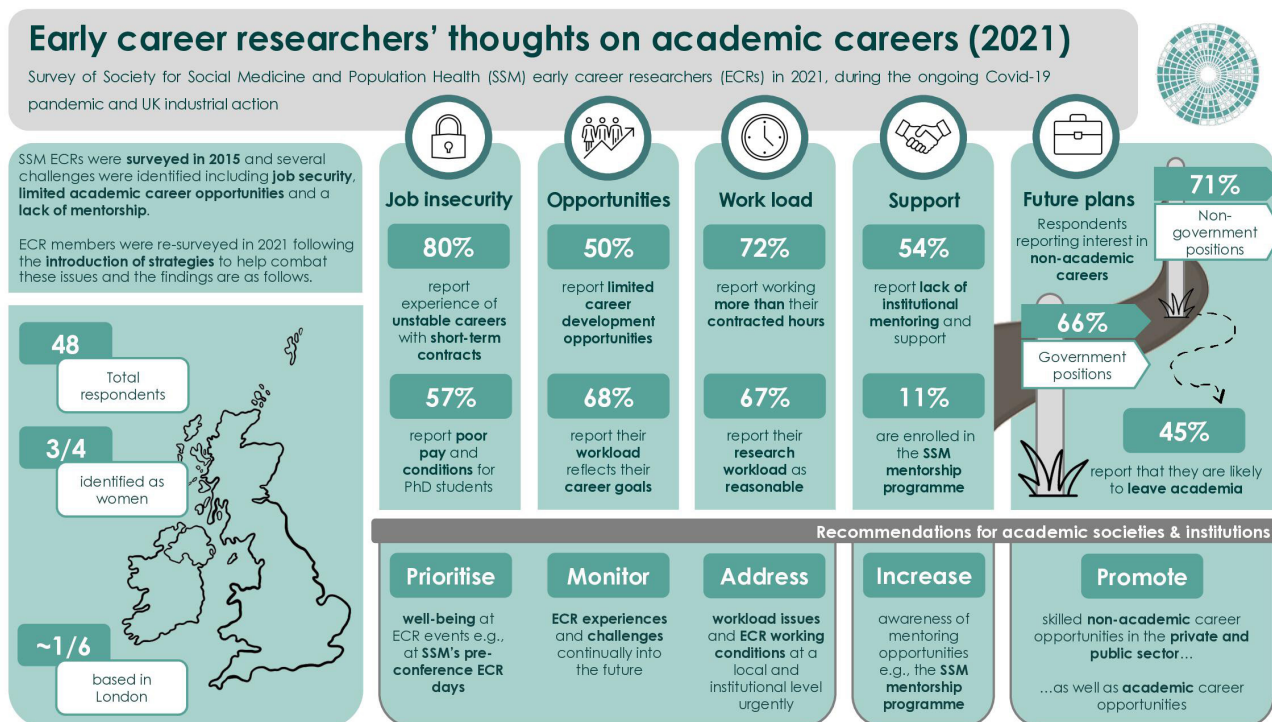


Figure 1 Infographic highlighting key results from the 2021 SSM ECR Well-being Survey.

5. Continuing to monitor ECR experiences and challenges in the future.

The SSM ECR Subcommittee and Professor Catherine B Hayes (SSM President 2022-2023)

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