

Eurodoc Statement on Equitable Opportunities in Academia for Early Career Researchers

1. Introduction

Eurodoc's vision is a fair and sustainable research culture for all. As an organisation representing early career researchers (ECRs) across Europe, Eurodoc promotes and contributes to policies that support those who face disadvantages at the beginning of their research careers. With the precarious conditions of ECRs some challenges are even more acute for ECRs coming from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds as they face additional structural barriers that hinder their ability to fully participate in academic life.

The objectives of this policy statement are centered on promoting and advocating for the equitable representation of all ECRs, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, nationality, or other personal characteristics. It brings attention to often-overlooked groups, such as first-generation researchers, international researchers, and people with disabilities. The document represents Eurodoc's internal commitment to equity, serving as a foundational reference for future policy recommendations and targeted initiatives focused on underrepresented groups. Additionally, the document pays a special focus on ensuring equitable opportunities while promoting mobilities within the research sector. Finally, it advocates for seeking to bridge the gap between policy and practice by calling for concrete, actionable changes at both institutional and national levels.

2. Challenges for early career researchers in academia

Employment conditions are the core of the difficulties faced by ECRs: precarious contracts, unpaid or underpaid work, reliance on payment in the form of bursaries for doctoral candidates and postdocs and a general lack of sufficient financial support. Simultaneously, they face intense pressure to publish for career advancement. Their dependence on supervisors or senior academics often creates power imbalances, limiting their ability to advocate for themselves as addressed in more details in Eurodoc's statement on Supervision¹.

Beyond career-related barriers, ECRs are often underrepresented in institutional decision-making processes, despite being expected to handle increasing administrative responsibilities. This disconnect between responsibility and influence leaves them without a voice in shaping their academic environments. As many ECRs are internationally mobile, they operate within institutional structures with which they are likely unfamiliar, further contributing to a sense of disempowerment and exclusion.

To summarise, ECRs often face precarious conditions and limited support. These challenges are even more severe for those from marginalised backgrounds. Addressing these issues is essential to building a more equitable and sustainable academic system.

¹ Eurodoc Statement on Doctoral Supervision: <https://zenodo.org/records/15784650>

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3. Equitable Opportunities in Academia

Eurodoc distinguishes between equal and equitable opportunities, advocating strongly for the latter. While equal opportunities focus on treating all individuals the same, regardless of their background or circumstances, this approach often fails to account for the systemic barriers and disadvantages faced by many ECRs. In contrast, equitable opportunities involve recognising these structural inequalities and providing tailored support to those who need it most. We argue that though being an ECR is inherently challenging, these challenges are often compounded by intersecting factors—such as socio-economic background or personal responsibilities—that further hinder recognition and career progression.

This section aims to provide a structured framework for confronting the structural barriers and systemic disparities that impact ECRs by addressing the barriers experienced by key groups that require special attention in order to ensure equitable opportunities which is essential to create a truly fair and supportive academic environment for all ECRs.

3.1. Women

Achieving equal opportunities in academia requires addressing the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect women. Despite their competence and dedication, women often face challenges related to work-life balance — particularly as many are early-career parents (see 3.2.) juggling professional and family responsibilities. However, these barriers extend beyond parenthood; women frequently face gender bias and sexism, receive fewer citations, are awarded less funding, and have fewer opportunities for career advancement (Llorens et al., 2021). The underrepresentation of women in STEM (SheFigures 2024 report) fields and university leadership further exacerbates gender disparities, reinforcing male-dominated spaces where decision-making power remains largely out of reach. Additionally, the prevalence of gender-based violence and the risk of sexual harassment create unsafe environments that can hinder professional growth. For the ERCs, these circumstances prevent proper career advancement and affect visibility in research from the very start of academic career.

3.2. Researchers with caretaker responsibilities

Academia is characterized by a lack of work-life balance, which is especially problematic for ECRs with caretaker responsibilities. The academic workload is often characterized by long hours, inflexible schedules, and high mobility expectations creates a particularly hostile environment for researchers with young families. Caretaker responsibilities introduce emotional, financial, and logistical demands on ECRs and they can ill afford the precarity of the research career. Re-entry challenges arise when parents take time off for childbirth, child-rearing, or other family responsibilities and later try to return to work. Without adequate workplace understanding and accommodations, parents and others with caretaker responsibilities in this situation may face increased stress and limited career progression.

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3.3. Researchers affected by ageism

ECRs starting their work in academia at an upper age are often subjected to age-related bias, facing barriers that hinder their academic progression. Researchers who enter academia later in life face systematic disadvantages compared to those who follow a traditional and linear academic career path.

3.4. Researchers with disabilities, chronic illnesses or invisible health conditions

ERCs with disabilities or chronic illnesses often face significant barriers in academia, limiting their full participation and career advancement. Many academic institutions still lack proper physical accessibility, making it difficult for these scholars to navigate campuses, laboratories, and conference spaces. Exclusion from essential academic activities, such as fieldwork, further marginalises them, restricting their ability to engage in research that requires travel or physical presence. Broader accessibility issues such as inadequate assistive technologies, inflexible work structures, and a lack of institutional support create additional obstacles. Although big funding programs, like MSCA, provide a special needs allowance, this practice is mostly not implemented in state-level funding programs and work contracts

3.5. Researchers belonging to LGBTQIA+ community

For ERCs belonging to sexual and gender minority groups (LGBTQIA+), systemic inequalities at many levels may limit their participation and career advancement in the academic sector. Discrimination on a daily basis is not uncommon, affecting career performance and mental health and increasing the minority stress (Taylor and Anonymous, 2020). The risk of harassment and further marginalization of LGBTQIA+ ERCs restrict the opportunity to participate in communication openly, without the need to hide a part of identity to stay safe. LGBTQIA+ ERCs often feel that staying closeted, not performing their identity and/or hiding their sexuality, is needed in order to progress in their career. Many institutions lack diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies protecting LGBTQIA+ researchers from discrimination at their workplace.

3.6. First-generation researchers

First-generation researchers are those whose family had no one pursuing an academic career. Unlike their peers with established academic networks, first-generation researchers often lack the cultural capital and familiarity with academic norms, making it harder to navigate complex institutional structures. As a result, those who had family ties or generational capital adapt to academic environments quicker, have more options when it comes to mentorship and support, while first-generation researchers need to gain the knowledge and build connections from zero. These challenges are further intensified by the precarious nature of academic employment with gaps between short-term contracts. Apart from financial instability, such precarity hinders continuous knowledge-building and further integration into academic circles – a gap between contracts may result in loss of necessary connections with other scholars for those who do not have these connections through family members. Formation of social capital with further integration into academia often takes longer time or does not happen at all.

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3.7. Researchers as members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups

People belonging to underrepresented racial and ethnic groups face systemic challenges in academia, such as racial ignorance, tokenism and discrimination practices (Dupree and Boykin, 2021). For ERCs, the intersection of race and social or economic status creates barriers that hinder career progression. Additionally, stereotypes can negatively impact mental health and communication, making it harder to build networks and collaborate with other scholars. Tokenism as granting a person a representative position in order to increase diversity additionally burdens scholars of colour and, for ERCs, can create unnecessary pressure and a leeway for harassment and discrimination from seniors.

3.8. Researchers facing religious or belief-based exclusion

Religious identity or the absence of it can influence ERCs' access to opportunities and inclusion within academic institutions. In some contexts, religious affiliation or cultural practices rooted in religion can lead to exclusion from specific activities, programmes, institutions, or even fields of study. This can affect not only members of religious minorities, but also individuals belonging to majority religions, or those who do not adhere to any religion or belief system. Institutions often lack inclusive policies or flexible arrangements to accommodate these differences, which can result in marginalisation and reinforce inequity across the academic landscape.

4. Mobility Demands

Mobility is a cornerstone of the European research area, enabling ERCs to collaborate across borders, develop professionally, and contribute to a dynamic and interconnected academic community. However, international mobility can be accompanied by significant vulnerabilities. Legal uncertainty, administrative burdens, financial barriers, gaps in social security, and lack of local support often make it difficult for these researchers to access stable and equitable opportunities.

At the same time, the right to mobility must be complemented by the right to stay. Researchers who choose to pursue academic careers in geographically peripheral or under-resourced areas or regions should not face structural disadvantages. Supporting both mobile and locally rooted researchers is essential for ensuring equitable opportunities, the local mission, and balanced development across the European Research Area.

4.1. Internationally mobile researchers

Internationally mobile researchers—those conducting their research in a country other than their own—play a crucial role in fostering cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange. However, despite the European Union's commitment to freedom of movement, these researchers often encounter significant barriers. Lack of cultural introduction can create challenges in communication and integration, sometimes limiting participation in academic governance or national-level programmes. For ERCs, language barriers can limit participation in

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academic life and specific measures must be taken to ensure that they can participate in the academic community, so that their inclusion in the academic community is not contingent on cultural proximity. Many also experience professional isolation due to the absence of strong local networks and support systems. External doctoral candidates may face particular financial difficulties, including ineligibility for certain benefits or higher tuition fees in the case of third country nationals.

4.2. Third country national researchers

ECRs from third countries—those outside the EU and EEA—face specific systemic barriers even after entering the European research system. Like their European peers, third-country national ECRs often work on short-term contracts—but for them, this employment insecurity can directly impact their legal residence status and ability to remain in the host country. Administrative burdens, such as complex and expensive visa renewals and limited institutional legal support, can add further strain. While many of these issues overlap with those faced by international mobile researchers, third-country nationals often encounter compounded obstacles that require more structured institutional support within existing legal frameworks.

4.3. Researchers from conflict zones or at risk in their home country

ECRs from conflict zones or those at risk face the same systemic barriers in their home country as other third-country national ECRs—such as legal uncertainty, administrative burdens, and limited institutional support—but their situation is often more severe due to heightened personal and professional vulnerability. Their residence status is typically tied to short-term academic positions or enrollment in doctoral education, making continuity precarious. Returning to their home countries may pose serious personal risks, while relocation itself can be financially burdensome and logistically complex. Even when able to relocate, they often face unclear bureaucratic procedures and lack guidance in establishing legal residence or continuing their research. Given their fragile position, these ECRs require tailored support mechanisms within existing frameworks, as well as efforts to maintain connections with their countries of origin to preserve academic networks where possible.

4.4. Early career researchers in peripheral regions in Europe

ECRs not only have the right to mobility, but also the right to pursue academic careers in their own country, region, or local institution—without being disadvantaged for doing so. However, researchers based in geographically peripheral regions in Europe, including rural areas, small towns, or less well-connected parts of Europe, often face structural challenges. Limited institutional funding can restrict access to essential research infrastructure, such as libraries, laboratories, software, and academic journals. These conditions may reduce opportunities for international collaboration, participation in conferences, and open-access publishing—factors that directly impact the visibility and recognition of research outputs. As a result, ECRs in these contexts may struggle to achieve the same level of academic integration and career stability as peers based in better-resourced institutions.

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5. Ensure diversity of research

Equitable opportunities in academia depend not only on fair treatment of researchers, but also on the recognition and support of diverse forms of research. ECRs working in interdisciplinary, intersectoral, or politically sensitive fields are faced with the same structural disadvantages that more senior researchers face, but their precarious situation exacerbates such disadvantages.

Field-specific challenges to ensuring academic freedom are heightened at the early career stage due to the precarious conditions of most R1 and R2 researchers. Similarly, barriers to acknowledging interdisciplinary and intersectoral contributions in research assessment processes can have enhanced negative consequences at the R1 and R2 stage, as researchers at this stage have precarious employments and their career progression is more directly contingent on their research outputs and other relevant contributions being fairly acknowledged in assessments of them and their research.

5.2. Academic freedom and early career researchers

Academic freedom is essential to academic progress, but it must coexist with the responsibility of institutions to assess research proposals based on scientific and professional merit. To ensure academic freedom and protect researchers in these vulnerable fields, governments must uphold academic freedom through robust legal protections. Without adequate institutional and societal support, ECRs remain especially vulnerable—both professionally and personally—even as their work is critical to a diverse and democratic research ecosystem.

5.2. Barriers for interdisciplinary research and researchers

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly acknowledged as vital to addressing complex global challenges, yet the academic system often struggles to accommodate those who work across traditional disciplinary boundaries. Current research assessment frameworks often fail to explicitly acknowledge and support non-traditional, emerging and interdisciplinary contributions.

5.3. Barriers for intersectoral research and researchers

As research increasingly intersects with broader societal needs, many ECRs are building careers that span academia and other sectors. Despite increasing calls for stronger collaboration between science and society, the academic research environment remains largely geared toward linear, traditional career paths. Evaluation frameworks in academia often fail to account for the range of outputs generated through intersectoral engagement. Valuing these diverse outputs is essential for supporting researchers whose work spans multiple professional contexts and for encouraging meaningful exchange between academia and society at large.

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6. Actions Needed for Equitable Opportunities in Academia

Building on the challenges outlined above, Eurodoc firmly advocates for both systemic and local-level changes to address the inequalities faced by ECRs, particularly those belonging to underrepresented or disadvantaged groups. These individuals often face multiple and overlapping barriers, making their academic and personal lives significantly more complex and unstable. In response, we identify key areas where meaningful reform is urgently needed.

1. **Ensure Transparent and Fair Assessment Processes:** Equity begins with how merit is assessed and opportunity is granted. Transparent and inclusive hiring practices, unbiased evaluation criteria, and fair recognition and promotion pathways are essential. Discrimination—whether implicit or structural—must be actively mitigated. Institutions must train assessors to combat biases in all assessment procedures to ensure that every researcher has equitable access to career progression and academic recognition.
2. **Strengthen and Sustain Supportive Practices:** Institutions must invest in mentoring programs—especially those tailored for first-generation researchers, women, and ECRs from marginalized communities—and promote an inclusive, family-friendly environment. Mental health services should be easily accessible and well-funded. Recognition of career breaks, support for ECRs with caretaking responsibilities, and targeted re-entry programs are vital. To ensure long-term impact, these practices must be embedded into the institutional structures—not offered as temporary or optional solutions.
3. **Guarantee Fair and Secure Employment Conditions:** Equity cannot exist in precariousness. Researchers should not be forced to choose between their financial security or well-being, and their commitment to an academic career. Addressing academic precarity is a foundational step toward creating a more inclusive and accessible research environment, and for making the profession accessible to all, regardless of background. ECRs should have **salaries and have social rights adequate to their qualifications**².
4. **Foster Flexible Work Environments and Inclusive Workplaces:** Academia must accommodate diverse needs through adaptable work structures. Fair workload distribution, inclusive environments, and flexible policies—such as remote work, hybrid formats, and adjustable schedules—are essential for ensuring equal participation. Academic spaces must also be welcoming for all researchers through inclusive facilities and respectful institutional cultures that actively reject stereotypes and discrimination.
5. **Ensure Representation and Participation in Governance** ECRs must have seats at the table where policies that affect them are developed, decided and implemented, and specific attention must be paid to support ECRs from underrepresented groups to participate in

² Eurodoc Statement on Employment and Financial Conditions of ECRs: <https://zenodo.org/records/15522204>

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academic governance. Institutions should promote decentralized governance, develop leadership pathways that actively support and elevate individuals from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, and treat academic freedom as an essential, uncompromising foundation of institutional governance³.

6. **Ensure a diverse leadership in academia to create visible role models for all ECRs:** without representation, aspiring researchers from marginalised groups struggle to see themselves reflected in academic structures, which in turn hinders their engagement and advancement.
7. **Dedicated scholars at risk:** In some cases, dedicated funding schemes may be necessary to support researchers in high-risk or endangered contexts, ensuring that no group is excluded from equitable academic opportunities due to their circumstances.

Conclusion

This document highlights the urgent need for greater attention to the realities faced by ECRs belonging to underrepresented or marginalised groups and outlines the steps necessary for creating a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape. Thus, we have a final recommendation. As none of the above reforms will have lasting impact without strong, transparent monitoring systems, we recommend that institutions regularly evaluate their equity policies through measurable indicators, integrate feedback from affected communities, and adjust their actions accordingly. Monitoring must go beyond compliance and become a tool for transformation—ensuring that commitments lead to real, visible change.

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Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, is a grassroots federation of 28 national associations of early career researchers (ECRs) from 26 countries across Europe. Eurodoc was established in 2002 and is based in Brussels. As a representative of doctoral candidates and junior researchers at the European level, Eurodoc engages with all major stakeholders in research, higher education, and innovation in Europe.



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³ Eurodoc Statement on Representational Rights of ECRs: <https://zenodo.org/records/15522244>

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