

## Eurodoc Statement on setting high quality employment conditions for early career researchers

This statement aims at putting forward recommendations for how to ensure high quality employment conditions for early career researchers (ECRs). There are many different aspects to employment quality, the employment relationship itself being a primary one. But in addition there are other general working conditions that need to be in place for the research environment to be a stimulating workplace (Rahal et al., 2023; Initiative for Science in Europe, 2022)<sup>1,2</sup>.

We often hear that the employment of ECRs is precarious. Precarious employment comes in different forms, with amongst other aspects lack of proper employment, unreasonably short employment periods, or part-time positions being key contributors. However, precarious employment also includes lack of equal access to a country's social security network, lack of career perspectives and continued job insecurity, all of which affect more than just the individual professional lives of ECRs (Wellcome, 2020). As such, precarious employment conditions are a marker of the low quality of employment conditions in the higher education sector.

Research repeatedly shows that employment quality is not only related to employee health (including mental health) and wellbeing, but also to productivity and the quality of employees' work outcomes. However, the academic world fails to live up to their own recommendations. Not only is this problematic for the individuals directly affected, but it is also problematic from a more general perspective, as academia asks for other sectors to implement its research findings, yet fails to do so itself (OECD, 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

Below, we identify several recommendations to foster a better quality of early career researchers' employment.

### **1) Proper employment with an appropriate salary**

ECRs, including doctoral candidates, are professionals and should be treated as such. As professionals, they should be employed and receive an appropriate salary.

An appropriate salary enables the economic independence of ECRs and reflects that they are high-skilled workers. The general employment conditions of research in public academic institutions should be similar to those elsewhere in the public sector, this includes that early career researchers in the public sector have access to the social benefits and security as other public employees. For early career researchers outside the public sector, their employment conditions should at least correspond to those within the public sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Rahal, R. M. et al, [Quality research needs good working conditions](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Initiative for Science in Europe \(2022\). A manifesto for Early Career Researchers](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Reducing the precarity of academic research careers](#)

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Proper employment also acts as a measure towards more diversity in academia. It allows for individuals who cannot otherwise afford it to pursue an academic career, whether the lack of affordability is due to financial circumstances or family situation.

### **2) Reducing precarity**

Precarity is widespread during the early stages of a researcher's career. The lack of predictability and job security characterised by a series of fixed-term employment contracts hinders both material and psychological welfare. It has further consequences on social rights, financial benefits, families, and personal relationships. Moreover, the constant insecurity represents a Damocles sword that impairs creativity, depresses work efficiency, and reduces the individual's overall career prospects and well-being.

It is therefore imperative for a sustainable research career to provide sufficient stability and plannability, reflected in the corresponding contract lengths. There should be no difference in employee's rights or protection between academia and the private sector of the economy; accordingly, the rules should be applied equally regarding contract lengths, consecutive temporary employment contracts, etc. To achieve this, more financial support allocated from various research stakeholders is essential.

### **3) Equal access to social benefits**

Social rights are the rights of people to secure their basic human needs, which include adequate and equitable social security provisions, sickness and parental benefits, pension rights and unemployment benefits.

It is the responsibility of employers and governments to ensure that early career researchers have the rights to such social benefits and are empowered to act upon those rights. Research funding organisations and research performing organisations must follow the agreed and signed collective (national or sectoral) bargaining agreements.

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure the proper alignment of national legislation for all native and international researchers within their legislative domain. It is furthermore also the responsibility of governments to ensure easy access to information regarding these rights and to ensure access to legal support for the ECRs to take action in cases where these rights are violated.

### **4) Representational rights**

ECRs must be empowered: they need to be given the tools and information to act upon their rights. Organisational practices and processes need to support ECR's power in organisational decision-making. They should be represented in research policy-making bodies on a national and international level. This representation should be implemented via

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democratic processes. Moreover, ECRs' right to join or start a trade union alongside other employees needs to be granted and protected.

### **5) Autonomy of early career researchers**

Academic freedom is the right of researchers to carry out their research without fear of repercussions, including the right of the individual researcher to freely choose where and in which form to publish their scientific work regardless of their results. It is the responsibility of academic institutions to ensure researchers are empowered to do so, while equally ensuring researchers observe the obligation to make scientific research accessible, as open as possible – and only as close as necessary –, in a transparent manner such that it can be reproduced, while also observing the lawful handling of intellectual property rights. Our recommendations for practices to be implemented to secure the academic freedom for ECRs can be found in the Eurodoc Statement on Academic Freedom (Eurodoc, 2023)<sup>4</sup>.

### **6) A healthy work-life balance**

Employers should implement policies aimed at maintaining a healthy work-life balance of the ECRs. These policies should include, but not be limited to, flexible working hours, and hybrid or remote work where applicable (Towards healthy working environments for ECRs; Eurodoc, 2023)<sup>5</sup>. Academic institutions should accommodate for the needs of ECRs of all genders and make academia inclusive for ECRs with disabilities, chronic illnesses and/or neurodivergence.

### **7) Broad career training**

Employers must provide ECRs with easy access to the resources necessary for fulfilling their jobs, including the resources for their research, as well as for training and learning and career development opportunities within and outside of academia. It should be acknowledged and respected that many ECRs will pursue a career outside of academia. As it is crucial for their employability, ECRs should receive funding for intersectoral, interfield, and international mobility as well as for participating in national and international academic events.

### **8) A supportive workplace culture**

Academic and research institutions should ensure a healthy and supportive organisational culture and a stimulating workplace atmosphere. This can be achieved by fostering high-quality supportive interpersonal relationships, such as between colleagues and with supervisors or superiors.

### **9) A diverse workplace**

Diversity is fundamental for the creation of inclusive research working environments. ECRs

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<sup>4</sup> [Eurodoc Statement on Academic freedom](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Towards healthy working environments for ECRs](#)

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working environments must be spaces that provide equal opportunities without discrimination on any base. More specifically, gender equality & diversity and inclusion programs should be implemented and sufficiently funded in the workplace.

### 10) A safe workplace environment

Workplaces should be both physically and psychologically safe, this also includes ensuring that occupational health and safety are ensured during laboratory work, field work, or similar. Clear organisational policies and procedures for reporting and managing discrimination, unsafe situations, violence and any other undesirable behaviour need to be in place. These must be transparently developed through participative processes and the effectiveness of their implementation require regular evaluation, transparent and based on a participative approach. In particular, members of at risk or otherwise marginalised groups must be consulted in the planning and implementation of these procedures.

### Closing remarks

To implement the above stated recommendations, we advocate for all research stakeholders – such as policy makers, research institutions, funding agencies, and governmental organisations – to take an active role in setting high quality employment conditions for ECRs and collaborate with each other. This should be done in an open dialogue with early career researchers in order to adequately address their needs.

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**Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers**, is a grassroots federation of 25 national associations of early-career researchers (ECRs) from 23 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 and innovation in Europe.

