



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Early Career Researcher
Network at LSE ■

Defining the *Early Career Researcher* Category

A Qualitative Investigation of ECR Experiences





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Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Jasmine Virhia, Costanza Torre, Elizabeth Storer. Funding for the research was provided through a “Changemaker Fund” awarded through LSE’s ECR Network. Between 2022-2023, Elizabeth Storer and Jasmine Virhia chaired LSE’s ECR Network. We acknowledge the generous contributions offered from across the ECR community at LSE throughout this research period, as well as support from this research from Professor Susana Mourato (Vice President and Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, LSE), Grace McConnell (Deputy Director, Research and Innovation, LSE) and Nathalie Van der-Elst (Research Development Manager, LSE).

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Executive Summary

Background and Objectives: The LSE Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network is open to all staff who identify as early-career with regards to their research and are typically within 10 years of their PhD award date. The ECR Network encourages LSE Fellows, and Policy and Research Staff as well as Faculty to join. It is a space for staff employed in permanent roles as well as Fixed-Term contracts, and embraces staff on Teaching, Research and Policy Career Tracks.

The ECR Network is an initiative set up for ECRs by LSE, and subsequently is run by ECRs. Membership provides the opportunity to engage with peers across LSE to share and develop research knowledge and skills, network and collaborate, and stay connected to research support available at the School and within the broader academic environment.

Approach: In its first year, the LSE Early Career Researcher Network aimed to shape its direction and inform the Research and Policy Staff Committee about ECR experiences. Conducting a qualitative investigation was prompted by the widespread ambiguity of the ECR category, cutting across academic disciplines and institutions. This study sought to unravel the diverse challenges, opportunities, and career paths encountered by ECRs, acknowledging the complexity added by contextual variations in defining the ECR stage. Ultimately, the qualitative analysis aimed to provide nuanced insights into ECR experiences at LSE, informing tailored policies and support mechanisms for this crucial career stage in academia.

Summary of key findings

- Our research found immense diversity in how ECRs experience the category at LSE. The time periods defined by institutions often bely the temporality of contract periods, which increasingly formed the marker of ECR experience.
- ECRs are involved in a variation of activities, which include different balances of research, teaching and administration.
- The nature of contracts often means that ECRs define themselves as within this category beyond the timeframes of ECR deployed by many funders.
- Many approach the ECR category as holding great opportunity to develop research and relationships across the institution. When afforded guidance and mentorship, many participants explained they had been able to rapidly progress their career and engage in new networks.
- A key factor for ECRs is the potential for supportive and mentorship-oriented relationships with supervisors
- The academic rigor inherent in the pursuit of research excellence challenges early-career researchers to refine their methodologies and contribute meaningfully to their respective fields.
- ECRs at LSE experienced a lack of clarity around contracts, and guidance on how to access opportunities for renewal.
- A lack of continuity and support around onward career progression was also evident.
- ECRs uncertain about the criteria for success and the benchmarks for career advancement.
- Formal guidance and informal perceptions about future opportunities proliferate, but there are often inconsistencies between what this means for ECR careers at LSE.
- ECRs at LSE encounter various pressures. The amount of time or resources necessary to fulfil responsibilities of roles can be at odds with other requirements necessary for career progression.
- Job-related pressures intersect with precarity, creating environments where ECRs are “racing against the clock.”
- Job-related pressures impact work-life balance and lead to burnout.
- ECR salaries, combined with the cost of living in London, impacts decisions whether to pursue careers in academia, or indeed at LSE.
- Salaries and research budgets are impacting the types, and number of research projects being undertaken.
- Budgets and restraints within departments are beginning to impact international networking and knowledge exchange.
- The precarity experienced by ECRs at LSE contributes to feelings of stress and anxiety.
- Highly qualified and experienced ECRs remain on hourly-paid contracts.
- Precarity is exacerbated for those on visas.
- ECRs at LSE are provided with varying advice about pursuing academic careers.
- Advice from senior academics is often at odds with the job application process or may be outdated. ECRs tend to rely on networks and colleagues at similar career stages.
- Having more centralised hubs of information is necessary.

Context of the study

Early-career researchers across UK academia are typically defined as individuals in the early stages of their academic careers, often immediately post-Ph.D. completion. Definitions, however, can vary across institutions and funding bodies, as well as globally. Research funding bodies often employ a flexible definition of the term “Early-Career Researcher,” encompassing individuals within three to ten years post PhD.

The ECR label encompasses researchers navigating the transition from doctoral studies to establishing themselves as independent scholars. It is marked by the pursuit of postdoctoral positions, fixed-term contracts, or early faculty appointments. Within this time, researchers are typically encouraged to build their research profile, publish in peer-reviewed journals, and secure research funding. Simultaneously, most ECRs undertake teaching responsibilities, contribute to departmental activities, and seek to establish a strong professional network within their academic discipline.

The challenges faced by early-career researchers, including job insecurity, pressure to meet publication targets, and the quest for funding, define this phase of their academic journey as they strive for sustainable and impactful careers.

In its inaugural year, the Early Career Researcher Network at LSE sought to jumpstart the network’s direction and to inform the Research and Policy Staff Committee of ECR experiences. The decision to conduct a qualitative investigation into understanding ECR experiences was driven by the presence and inherent ambiguity of this category across research environments. The ubiquity of ECRs spans academic disciplines and institutional settings, creating a need for a nuanced exploration that considers the varied challenges, opportunities, and trajectories encountered by such researchers. The ambiguity in defining the ECR stage across different contexts adds complexity to the understanding of their experiences. This qualitative study aimed to better understand the multifaceted nature of ECR experiences and trajectories at LSE, providing insights into the unique and shared aspects of their professional development, with the overarching goal of informing policies and support mechanisms tailored to the intricacies of this crucial career stage in academia.



Methodology

The details of this report include the main themes and direct quotations which emerged from four focus groups. These focus groups aimed to provide a discursive space for ECRs at LSE across different disciplines and stages of their careers to share their experiences.

This research is essential in shaping LSE'S ECR Network. It is necessary to understand the ECR landscape for a voluntary and participatory network to be successful, and as a result, this work will identify key areas of change that will significantly impact the research and teaching landscape at LSE. This investigation will enable the LSE ECR Network to share findings with other research institutions and highlight the approach to understanding what it means to be an ECR. In doing so, the work will not only promote the value of ECR networks generally but demonstrate that LSE is committed to sustainable change for their ECR community.

Focus groups are a valuable research method due to their ability to elicit rich, in-depth insights through interactive discussions among a diverse group of participants. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups encourage participants to share and build upon each other's perspectives, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of a given topic. This method is particularly effective in exploring complex and nuanced issues, as it allows researchers to observe not only what participants say but also how they engage with differing opinions. The group dynamic stimulates discussion of different ideas and experiences, uncovering aspects that might be overlooked in more structured and formalised approaches. Moreover, focus groups provide a platform for participants to express their views in a social context, capturing shared experiences that contribute to a more holistic comprehension of the subject under investigation. All focus groups began with asking participants to write down three words they felt summarised their experience as an ECR at LSE. Once participants had shared their words and provided context as to why these words were chosen, open-ended questions centred on these words were posed by the researchers to facilitate discussion.

Demographics of participants

- **Total number of participants:** 16 from focus groups; in addition, 9 respondents from ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey, whose gender/age/nationality/racial backgrounds were not specified.
- **Gender of focus group participants:** 10 women, 6 men.
- **Ages of focus group participants:** between 29-54 (average: 36; median 35)
- **Nationality of focus group participants:** 4 British, 2 Chilean, 2 Russian, 1 Brazilian, 1 British-Italian, 1 Cypriot, 1 Hungarian, 1 Indian, 1 Irish, 1 Italian, 1 unknown
- **Positions of focus group participants:** 5 LSE Fellow, 3 Research Fellow, 2 Research Officer, 2 Assistant Professor, 1 Visiting Fellow, 1 Guest Teacher, 1 Research Economist, 1 Assistant professorial research fellow.
- **Positions of survey respondents:** 4 Assistant Professors, 2 Research Officers, 1 British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, 1 LSE Fellow, 1 Postdoctoral Researcher.
- **LSE Department/Research Centre of focus group participants:** 4 Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC), 2 Management, 1 Centre for Economic Performance, 1 European Institute, 1 International Inequalities Institute, 1 International Relations, 1 Mathematics, 1 Media and Communications, 1 Methodology, 1 Religion and Global Society, 1 Statistics.
- **Duration of contracts of focus group participants:** 3 months, 1 year or less, 1 year, 12 months, 24 months, 26 months, 30 months, 34 months, over 3 years, 3 years, 4 years, 6 years, 8 years, 2 N/A.

Limitations

The researchers acknowledge that the sample size within this investigation is not representative of the number of ECRs at LSE. The researchers faced difficulty in recruitment due to the time of year the research was conducted (summer 2023 when many academic staff take leave, are travelling to conferences, or focussed on their own research), however the variation across academic disciplines is a clear strength of the current work and has provided a basis for future investigations.

Defining the Early Career Researcher (ECR)

Institutions often define the ECR category, but rarely are ECRs themselves asked of the experiential and practical implications of this title.

Key findings

- Our research found immense diversity in how ECRs experience the category at LSE. The time periods defined by institutions often bely the temporality of contract periods, which increasingly formed the marker of ECR experience.
- We found that ECRs are involved in a variation of activities, which include different balances of research, teaching and administration.
- The nature of contracts often means that ECRs define themselves as within this category beyond the timeframes of ECR deployed by many funders.

“ [W]e have had discussions in a lot of our meetings that it would be good to change the ECR term, I guess, in terms of making it more inclusive. There are many, many other academic parts that look different. Some are just research, some are just teaching, some are research and teaching. So having a more inclusive term, maybe early career academic, something like that, I don't know, but that was on my mind as well.”

Pilot focus group

“ While we all call ourselves early career researchers, maybe it's quite a big range in the situation we are, where it is different if you are an early career research and you are early-early career researcher, or early trying to be senior career researcher or something like that. So, it's not a homogenous group. It's more like a heterogeneous group that may have different needs, and also it depends on what department you are, as you were saying before. So, it's not like one big group of people that they all think the same and they all have the same needs.”

Focus group 1

“ The biggest unexpected challenge for ECRs, I've encountered, is that funding bodies don't acknowledge the fact that many ECRs have had to spend years in precarious positions before landing a permanent job. “Early Career” status is dated from completion of the PhD. Applying for early career funding often requires institutional backing that only permanent faculty enjoy. This means that those Early Career academics who have spent a number of years in postdoc positions have only a small window of opportunity to apply for Early Career funding. In my case, my first permanent position began in 2019, six years after completing my PhD. This meant I had only two years to apply for some Early Career funds. Added to this, the impact of the pandemic, including added caring responsibilities for many, there has been an entire generation of early career researchers who have been alienated from these funds. I'd imagine these are disproportionately women academics. Funding bodies could address this by defining “Early Career” as dating from either the completion of a PhD OR the beginning of a permanent contract if applicable.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

The importance of research support

Key Findings

- Our research found that many approach the ECR category as holding great opportunity to develop research and relationships across the institution. When afforded guidance and mentorship, many participants explained they had been able to rapidly progress their career and engage in new networks.
- A key factor for ECRs is the potential for supportive and mentorship-oriented relationships with supervisors. Engaging supervisors provide valuable guidance, facilitate skill development, and enhance the overall research experience. The sense of community within academic departments and research groups fosters collaboration, idea exchange, and a supportive environment that can mitigate the challenges of navigating the early stages of a research career.
- The academic rigor inherent in the pursuit of research excellence challenges early-career researchers to refine their methodologies and contribute meaningfully to their respective fields.

“ [I]n a way it can be daunting because like, you know, it’s up to you how much you can push your career, but I also find it a bit exciting, because it allows me to be experimental, because like I am deciding, you know, whether I want to be on a teaching track or a tenure track, or do I want to do innovation, what kind of projects do I want to start.”

Pilot focus group

“ [T]he freedom that the job actually has compared to a lot of other jobs that are very time constrained or you have to be in the office, and time for you to go to something like this, for example, wouldn’t be there.”

Pilot focus group

“ so, I’m pretty confident that I will stay here, and I’ve had a really good experience as an ECR, so my line manager is amazing and I think – I don’t have the conflicting problems. One, I am just a researcher, so I don’t have any academic role.”

Pilot focus group

“ [As] economist sometimes, we work on a lot of topics and it’s difficult sometimes to find what is your real area of interest. [...] And I think also coming back to support, I felt like talking to my line managers and other people, I felt like I was exposed to several let’s say projects and then I’m trying to still discover what I like, and I have given the possibility also to explore that.”

Focus group 1

“ [I]n terms of teaching and the research, I’m quite happy because I think that they are very well balanced, so actually I teach less here than previously in Italy, so I have also more time for the research and to think about the research, because sometimes only the thought about the teaching and the weekly schedule takes some importance than the research.”

Focus group 1

“ For me, my line manager’s quite young, so she’s very kind of on top of new things because she – and she also takes a lot of pride in being a line manager, I think, so I have no problem with her at all. Actually, it’s probably the best line manager I could ever wish for.”

Focus group 1

“ I think also it depends on your previous experiences. I had a very bad experience before. I mean, for me, LSE is like heaven compared to where I was before.”

Focus group 1



“ [I]n my case, all the colleagues were very nice and they tried to support, to introduce me, let’s say, to the department. They organised also this coffee and cake weekly, so just to have like a chat and share some thoughts or some – about the department. So no, I’d say that from this point of view, I’m very happy here.”

Focus group 1

“ [F]rom my experience, it’s also a very supportive environment. People in my department are very approachable, and I think also the infrastructure is kind of helpful, like LSE for You and these sort of services. I guess the only thing that could be improved is with roles, some aren’t clear, like it’s not really transparent if you’re part of the faculty or if you’re sort of more on the side. So, perhaps it could be better defined. Other than that, I think from my experience, it’s, yeah, by far the best that I have.”

Focus group 1

“ I would say also that people – and at least when you go to conferences, we are kind of proud to work in LSE, like people go and talk to you because you are at LSE, so it feels like kind of nice.”

Focus group 1

“ I feel pretty lucky to have landed it [this ECR job] because I’ve worked on a variety of projects, including a couple of projects I feel really wedded to, that I think are impactful and sort of meaningful in the way that maybe the work I was doing before wasn’t.”

Focus group 2

“ My son is neurodivergent and struggling with school, so we have a lot going on at home, but I think I’ve been quite fortunate in that I have colleagues that understand that – maybe not the management-management, but the people, my line managers have certainly been very flexible about it.”

Focus group 2

“ I feel like I’ve kind of found a niche where I can sort of progress. I think people now at the centre know that my work’s quite good, and because we’re all grant funded, everyone’s looking – so, you’re encouraged to bring money in, which I’ve never had before. Previously, it’s literally been, you’re in, you do the job, you’re out, you know. [...] I mean, it’s not perfect, but in comparison to other experiences I’ve had, it’s pretty cushy, although that’s partly founded on significant financial privilege that I have, so basically I worry less about reducing my hours than a lot of other people would, so I’m conscious of that.”

Focus group 2

“ It’s also super exciting. I find the community amazing [...] and the fact that you interact with so many people who are excited about what they’re doing, I think this is absolutely fantastic. And the growth which I get – this is something I was looking for as an early career researcher, because transferring from PhD to actual job does require some advancement, and I think that at the LSE it’s a very, very comfortable place to do this.”

Focus group 2

“ [S]ort of two years and a half into the position, I do think that there’s been a lot of opportunities for actual career development and understanding sort of what an academic is as a whole. So, I’ve had both teaching and been given administrative duties, and I’ve been able to find some sort of time to do research, especially during the summer. And I think that in that sense, I’ve really developed a very – a pretty full understanding of what the work of an academic is, not just saying, “Oh, you know, I’m just doing research,” or, “I’m just doing teaching,” but actually having that overall experience and understanding how those different parts fit together. So, I think in that sense, it’s good that it’s a career development – it’s a genuine career development position, if that makes sense.”

Focus group 2

“ [LSE’s] hourly paid rate is better than other places, and there’s times where I appreciated having that as opposed to nothing. So, I cannot say that I didn’t gain something positive from it. [...] And certainly the teaching experience itself has been great in terms of challenge, in terms of the level of students that I get. I teach all at Masters level, and that’s always really enjoyable and inspiring, so that’s a positive aspect of it.”

Focus group 2

“ I’m very lucky with my line manager now, [she] is also grant funded, she also has kids, you know. There’s just that click and she kind of – but if I had a different line manager, I’d probably have a very different experience.”

Focus group 2

“ From my experience, after my PhD, I faced unemployment, so having the possibility now of working on what I want to do as a research fellow, with a position, you know, which allows me to enhance my research, really develop a new research project, but from what I did before, I find it better than nothing, even if there is this question of insecurity [...] I have this opportunity to work, enhance my career, my path, and I can understand that this position, you know, of research staff maybe does not allow a permanent contract, but to my mind that is a part of the game and I have to use the support to make me able to get something better after.”

Focus group 3

“ in terms of the overall level of support from the department, I really feel supported. The community is amazing. People keep saying, “If you have questions, please stop by.” And I feel like we do have some, you know, like social events that also provide the opportunity to meet in person and to talk, because this is how you also can gather some information. And I feel that [...] I do have support I want to have right now.”

Focus group 3

“ Against all these downsides, there are two main advantages: lower level of responsibilities, which frees up time for research and teaching, and life in general, and higher amount of freedom.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

Clarity on hiring practices and communication

Key Findings

- ECRs at LSE experienced a lack of clarity around contracts, and guidance on how to access opportunities for renewal.
- A lack of continuity and support around onward career progression was also evident.
- ECRs uncertain about the criteria for success and the benchmarks for career advancement.
- Formal guidance and informal perceptions about future opportunities proliferate, but there are often inconsistencies between what this means for ECR careers at LSE.

“ [My contract] actually finishes now in December, and I’m kind of not – I think they will renew it. They haven’t told me anything, but I think it will happen.”

Pilot focus group

“ [I]t’s mildly unclear why LSE use the term LSE fellow, in my opinion. It doesn’t mean anything to anybody outside of LSE. Even people in LSE don’t know what it means. [...] I think in part they use it because they’re trying to make it sound like a bigger deal than like a teaching fellow in another university. [...] I think they’re trying to use the name to boost us up a bit, but because it’s not clear expectations, I don’t think it’s too effective.”

Pilot focus group

“ often there is a sense that you’re in these positions but you’re not going to be hired for a professor position or a permanent position, and I’ve seen that with the fellows as well. I’ve applied for several of the fellow positions in my department and it’s very much been kind of, you know, “Your experience isn’t close enough to what we’re looking for. Your research isn’t close enough,” even though I studied and have taught on many of the courses. So yeah, there’s that sense of like no development, no progression, nothing around, “We want you to stay.” Nothing, you know, even beyond polite conversation around what you’re doing, whereas at least at UCL, they make comments about, “We want you to stay, we want to develop you,” even though in reality that hasn’t emerged.”

Focus group 2

“ I don’t know if this is a policy, but this is what I was told, that you cannot hire people for the next position from the previous position, from within the department, this is frowned upon. [...] The explanation I was given is that the school PhD programme is going to be evaluated on the quality of the placement of their PhDs, and if you keep hiring your own PhDs, you don’t give a good signal, because it looks like they cannot do anything outside of your school. [...] Within five years, if you show that you’re good enough, they can hire you back. But yeah, it sounds like it’s standard in the UK academia. It doesn’t look like it’s the same in Europe, but in the UK academia it sounds like standard practice.”

Focus group 2

“ In our department, it’s not necessarily a consistently applied policy, in a sense that a few of – there was at least one recent hire, I think it would have been 2017 or something, somebody who had done their PhD in our department, then did a postdoc, always sort of with external funding but in the department, and then was hired as an assistant professor, but that is very much the exception. In the other positions, the recent hires we’ve had, I have basically been explicitly told that anyone who had either gotten a PhD or been a fellow there was automatically removed from the long list, basically. So, I think the reasoning I was given was something similar, that you have to sort of prove yourself somewhere else, and then once you’ve done that and you’ve demonstrated that you’re able to thrive in a different context then maybe you can come back, but not if there’s an immediate position.”

Focus group 2

“ I was told that there’s definitely not an explicit policy on this, but that it’s very, very competitive, so the implication there is that, you know, you can apply but you’re not likely to be good enough [laughs]. And what they’ve done is they’ve often hired people at fellow level in our department who are already lecturers, more senior in other parts of the country or from universities abroad, so we’re competing – it’s advertised as an entry level position and there is very much a gap between I guess the expectation of the job advert and the reality of who they hire because they’re getting applications from people that are a much more senior level. ”

Focus group 2

“ If it’s the rules of the game that apply to everyone, I didn’t find it detrimental. But when you’re told you cannot be hired, but if I were in a group with somebody who was hired, in the situation where we both were told that it can – so, I think this is when it gets really annoying, because it’s already a very uncertain job, and adding uncertainty because now there are rules which are not actually rules, and they sometimes apply and sometimes they don’t apply [...] This is where it gets tricky. If it’s clear, it’s fine. When it gets muddy, that makes it more complicated. ”

Focus group 2

“ [A]fter applying for essentially my job, but as an assistant professor rather than a fellow, I then had a conversation with one of the people who was essentially doing the shortlist, and I think that that was the thing that really wrecked my confidence completely, and then seeing who they’d shortlisted. [...] [E]veryone on that shortlist had a PhD in the US, and to me what was worrying about that was that what signal are you giving to your own PhD students, who at this point have a very clear idea that getting a PhD in the UK is not even going to make you competitive for these positions. [...] I think it was more about [...] reproducing essentially that hierarchy between universities that I think was [...] really quite brutal to hear as an early career researcher, saying, “You’re never going to get a job at any of the top universities but, you know, the other ones might still take you. ”

Focus group 2

“ I think there is advantages to career hopping, not just like for your salary, but also for other exposures to kind of slightly different colleagues which you might collaborate and do papers with, and then you’re kind of expanding your network. I think that that definitely has impacted my confidence, just not knowing that that was actually an absolutely fine route to take, and always feeling like a bit of a failure because I wasn’t going or I wasn’t in the position to apply for particular fellowships. So, I think that there’s something around any kind of rules that we’re told that aren’t really rules, but it’s just like hearsay through the academic community or Twitter or those career talks that you go to, that are largely quite the same, that are supposed to be inspiring but then like you kind of never really feel like you’re ever going to be, you know, close to the person that’s in that seat and things like that. ”

Focus group 2

“ I think my recommendation would be for LSE to give like central advice to early career researchers, so it not to be ad hoc, for it to be something that then like is perhaps followed – throughout LSE would be fantastic, but also if it’s throughout like higher education in general, or at least like the London universities, so there’s some kind of similarity between the career advice and the opportunities and the path that – you know, how we do progress from position to position, and how we’re supposed to go about that. Because whenever I’ve enquired about that, it’s very murky, and it’s kind of like, you know, it requires a lot of proactiveness on the part of the person. So, I think it should be a bit more transparent and widely supported. ”

Focus group 2

“ [A]t LSE, there is this list of journals that are expected for one to publish in, at least if you want to be promoted, right? But at least in my disciplines, if you read the list of journals, it’s very unclear why those journals are there, because some of them are not necessarily some of the best in the field. So yeah, there’s a lot of unclear procedures for us to deal with, without knowing exactly how to meet those milestones, right? I mean, you have to publish, but sometimes to publish in the top journals, you need more than the contract time you have, right? So, there are some missing parts in this conversation that I really just don’t know what to do about them. ”

Focus group 3



“ in terms of the responsibilities, I have mentees [...], so I’m really trying to gather information, what I’m supposed to know to actually be a good mentor for students, for instance, or to really, you know, like understand the expectations, understand what is trajectory to hopefully meet them, and simply understand how academia works from, you know, being in the position as an assistant professor, not as a PhD student. And I guess, yeah, for me, it’s like constantly having many, many questions in my mind, trying to either find people who could answer them or, you know, using pretty much the LSE website or Google or whatever [laughs] to, yeah, get a better sense of what am I doing, what am I supposed to do, and what my goals are, whether they are correct goals, whether, you know, the way I want to reach them is right.”

Focus group 3

“ At LSE, we were told that we will be assigned a mentor [...] when I started asking around about this role, some people were saying like that, yeah, you really need to tell this person, because this is with whom you will actually, you know, kind of see whether you’re on track. But then by now we still don’t have mentors. And I’m okay with that, I guess, on the one hand. On the other hand, I do feel that maybe it’s good to have someone with whom I could simply really check that I understand the expectations and I am on the track with actually meeting them.”

Focus group 3

Job-related pressures

Key findings

- ECRs at LSE encounter various pressures. The amount of time or resources necessary to fulfil responsibilities of roles can be at odds with other requirements necessary for career progression.
- Job-related pressures intersect with precarity, creating environments where ECRs are “racing against the clock.”
- Job-related pressures impact work-life balance and lead to burnout.

“ the kind of space that you’re in as an early career researcher, it’s kind of characterised by volatility. Like, one minute you’re doing something and you’re like, “This is great, I drove that [...]” and then the next minute you’re kind of back into that uncertainty. [...] I think that’s part of an academic career anyway [...] but I think particularly this phase, it’s really acute. [...] And I think the pace of that, having to be pretty intense, particularly within contracts that are like a year, two years, or it’s like if you don’t achieve this then your contract might not be extended.”

Pilot focus group

“ [The ECR experience consists of] wearing many hats, so technically the [...] the focus is on publishing research. But what I found is teaching takes up most of the time, and then admin comes in, other like invisible tasks that are expected, but then your time for research is very limited. Then the ways in which your career will progress is not getting that much time because the role is not equipped for that.”

Pilot focus group

“ I think, yeah, an example of that in my own field, in anthropology, I think the UK job market, I’ve seen about three permanent positions advertised in the last year, and that just obviously means like everyone’s applying at the same time.”

Pilot focus group

“ FS3: I think there isn’t really an appreciation for like all of these other things, like writing a grant or, you know, providing like informal mentorship to people. [...]

FS2: External facing stuff as well. We do loads of industry workshops and stuff that’s not technically part of my job description,

FS3: And this stuff is also scary I think for ECRs, like public speaking, like you have to prepare, you have to think about your image. Like you’re often in pretty threatening environments that are scary. And so this isn’t maybe like more senior members of staff can just step into that environment, feel very natural, but I think it’s for ECRs, it’s like – so, you’re doing all of that stuff that takes a lot of emotional toll. It stops you writing that book.”

Pilot focus group

“ [I]t’s stressful because especially it’s one year, basically just after you start your postdoc or a fellowship, you have to start applying for the next one if you want to continue, so that was very stressful. And also I was talking to people who were in their forties or after their forties and they’re still unsure what to do next, where they will end up.”

Focus group 1

“ I feel like I need to prove myself and sometimes, yes, I have worked for weeks sometimes twelve hours, or every day, let’s say. Sometimes I don’t. But I think the unpredictability or this desire of being seen as being good and therefore people will give me the opportunity to carry on in the work has for me translated to working extremely hard, or offering myself to every single thing that is available. And while my line manager has told me it’s too much sometimes, I still feel like I have this fear of missing out, and that one opportunity may lead to something else, which will be good for me.”

Focus group 1

“ I think that the fact that we are women counts a lot, in the sense that most of the researchers are men, and so you feel like that you have to show something more in order to have like a prominent role in the field.”

Focus group 1

“ [T]he feeling that has been most overwhelming over the last four years basically has been an idea of time running out, and that's both in the sense that because I was always on temporary contracts, I knew that, you know, I had an expiry date to an extent by which I would have to find something else. But also because, as someone who's more on sort of a fairly academic track, I also get the feeling that, you know, as an early career researcher, I have an expiration date, whereby if I don't have a job after four years, that probably means that I'm never going to find a permanent position that satisfies me, or that I'm going to become less competitive on the job market. So, also this continued feeling of having to apply for jobs, publish faster, get things out, because otherwise I'm not going to land a job, and that can essentially mean that I'm going to have to rethink my entire career. So, that's probably been the overwhelming feeling.”

Focus group 2

“ The other term I've put is double standards, and this is really – this has a lot to do with I think the experience of being a fellow in a department, where you have comparable experience, I would say, to some of the assistant professors, a comparable position to an academic, but a lot more teaching, and it also comes from the very real experience of knowing that as a fellow you're good enough to teach in a department but you're never going to be hired by one. And this is something that I think the survey of fellows was very clear about, that pretty much everyone knows that they would never be hired by their department. So, that has been something that has been quite sort of frustrating to an extent, feeling that, you know, as a teacher, you're valued, but you're not considered up to par as a researcher.”

Focus group 2

“ [C]urrently, my position's summed up by the fact that I have three jobs at the moment. So, I am at the bottom of the pecking order at LSE. I'm officially a guest teacher, and I have had a position at that level since I graduated in 2021, so two and a half years. I have a position as lecturer at UCL, which is only one day a week at the moment, and that's permanent, ongoing, and I have a position as a postdoctoral research assistant at Goldsmiths. So, that kind of really sums up why I've put unpredictable, and of course stressful. So, you can imagine, I have three inboxes.”

Focus group 2

“ I always found a bit hypocritical of LSE is doing these career development positions, but then my teaching hours are 116 hours in termtime and that's not including supervision, not including any marking. So, if it's a career development position and we assume that, especially for LSE, research is very important, then I think you have to regulate just how many hours a fellow can teach.”

Focus group 2

“ I'm quite stressed because it's a one-year thing, so I need to look for the next thing right away, and then obviously I think there's a lot of uncertainty to one's ability to produce the stuff that is, you know, important to get a job. So, I have like two peer review publications, three now, but none of them seem to matter in the places that I need to be at because of the internal lists of journals and all that that comes with it.”

Focus group 3

“ [For short-term contractors], unless you secure a big grant, there is no proper route to extend contracts. So, I know LSE provides a lot of support for us to apply for grants, but if there is something that could be changed in that sense, in terms of either further support [...] because of the pressures for publication that early career scholars may have, sometimes it may be hard to have the time for grant application work.”

Focus group 3

“ Grateful to have got the three years of comparatively generous funding, but worried over what might come next. The stress of trying to publish widely, teach, and ensure I develop a reputation is common, but juggling these and having a normal life external to academia is hard.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

“ I cannot understand why faculty is required to grade all assignments (and second grade too) and why we cannot hire student assistants to do this since often it is repetitive work that simply wastes time and potential of junior faculty – time that can be much better invested towards more beneficial activities. Faculty can train students to grade assignments well and they can provide clear grading criteria and they can overview the grading process to ensure high-quality grading. This would free up so much valuable time for faculty to invest in research and in better quality teaching as they could spend their time on developing the teaching material (rather than spend that time doing repetitive grading work). One argument I heard for why LSE requires faculty to grade student assignment is that students expect and appreciate this firsthand attention from faculty and it's a main reason they come to the LSE and one of the main reason student evaluations are high. To be honest, if this is the main reason then I see this as a big red flag. Students should come to LSE for the quality of the teaching content they receive and if contact with faculty is important then that should come through the teaching hours, not the grading. LSE is the first institutions I've been at and heard of that has this grading requirement and it has really surprised me as it truly eats up so much valuable time from faculty (and thus collective value and potential of faculty more broadly). I enjoy being at the LSE but the lack of financial support (both salary and research budget) and the lack of support for teaching (especially on activities that do not help faculty to develop themselves as leading experts in the field) has raised serious concerns for me about the viability of a long-term career at the LSE. It is true that LSE enjoys a big reputation, but a strong reputation can only do that much and won't help attract or retain top talent on the long-term.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

“ Challenges include the structural effects of precarity which induce a culture of overwork. This tends to lead junior people to overly concentrate on teaching, which is not necessarily in their career interests. Time for pushing out publications is tight, however. ECRs who are not on permanent contracts can also sometimes find themselves excluded from funding opportunities offered by the department that are only open to permanent faculty. Mentoring for ECRs, particularly those on temporary contracts, can be uneven. The biggest problem for those on temporary contracts, and ECRs in permanent positions is a lack of research time. Early career sabbaticals would help immensely, but often a period of at least two (in my case four) is necessary before you are eligible for significant sabbatical leave.”

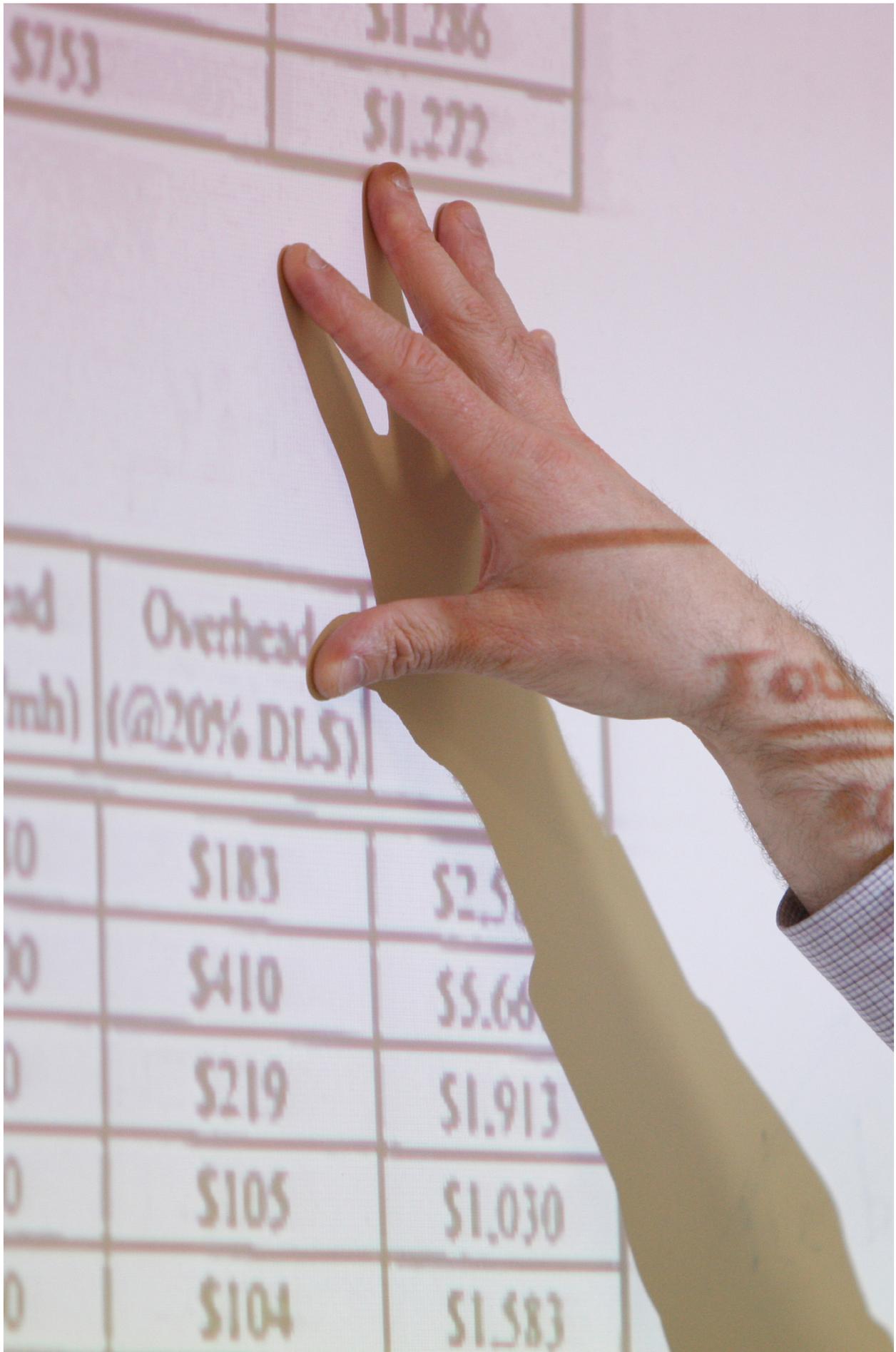
ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

“ Work-life balance then of course comes into play: constant worry that what I am doing to prepare myself to leave and find a job elsewhere won't be enough, and that I should do more. I initially thought publishing and teaching was enough, but in today's market that is insufficient: even as an ECR, you are applying to jobs that ask you to demonstrate evidence of past grant/funding seeking strategies, of early forms of impact, of service (within your institution or otherwise), admin roles, collegiality.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

“ [S]ometimes, usually towards the end of the project, you realise that what the PI will want and what is good for your own career development can diverge. And that's where you kind of feel that tension, because part of you is thinking, “Well actually, is this project the end of the road for me? I should be looking at myself.” But at the same time, you kind of want to do a good job. So, you kind of get torn in this different direction and you end up using most of your kind of non-work hours to try and fulfil these tasks [...] for the sake of progression, because if you want to go down a kind of, quote unquote, orthodox academic route, you need to teach, you need to publish and so forth, and if you have a PI that wants to have grand big workshops and so forth then fantastic, but if you're teaching, you're not actually publishing, you know.”

Pilot focus group



Financial pressures

Key findings

- ECR salaries, combined with the cost of living in London, impacts decisions whether to pursue careers in academia, or indeed at LSE.
- Salaries and research budgets are impacting the types, and number of research projects being undertaken.
- Budgets and restraints within departments are beginning to impact international networking and knowledge exchange.

“ [T]he other pressure when it comes to LSE and also other universities also if I’m looking for like a fellow job, then you find like the salaries are way too low, and so there is that, you know, anxiety that am I really downgrading by getting to a smaller university.”

Pilot focus group

“ [T]he most challenging barrier is honestly the financial one. London is expensive, data collection is expensive, conference travel is also expensive. The current salary and research budget support simply don’t allow me to remain competitive as a scholar internationally. I had to cut down the conferences I attend (even though this is necessary to share my research as well as maintain and grow my network), cut down the projects I do at any given point (because of how expensive it is to collect data and deal with revisions that often require multiple additional data collection efforts). I also cannot really maintain my international network of scholars that I have so carefully build over the years because I cannot invite speakers to LSE since LSE (or at least my department, which I don’t mention to maintain my anonymity) doesn’t cover travel costs for speakers abroad (this is a huge disincentive for scholars to come give a talk and there I am also not invited to give a talk to their institutions). Also, the financial constrains to live a decent life in London and build an internationally competitive research program (which benefits LSE, too), the lack of support for teaching is incredibly disappointing and demotivating.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey



“ For women and men in the earlier stage of their career, if they have children, it’s very difficult. It’s very expensive, and you end up trying to juggle both things. [...] I’m from Chile. In Chile also, if you work in a company that is more than 100 employees, childcare needs to be provided, so I think that that would be amazing.”

“ One of the hardest things that I find being an early career researcher as opposed to a PhD student is that, as a PhD student, you get a lot of discount rates for things like conferences that you don’t get as an early career researcher. And my research allowance is currently the exact same one that I had as a PhD student, but my costs have increased significantly. [...]

“ [I]f there could be more money allocated at the central level, that would be great actually.”

Focus group 2

“ At my school where I pursued my PhD, there was the package for new assistant professors, that the school actually was helping with renting a place, so it would cover I think actually up to fifty percent of the rent. And because it’s also quite an expensive city, I was just thinking that, you know, I feel the price on the rent in London contributes to many questions that we covered here today related to the salary and, you know, effect on life and everything. So I don’t know, maybe this will be the dream, to have such a support from the school.”

Focus group 3

“ I think [the uncertainty] has made me question the viability of living in the UK, because then I need to start thinking about – well, the salary is not ideal. [...] there are places that pay better and that are freer in terms of how you conduct your research. But then at the same time, you know, not everybody wants to end up in the Gulf, for example, or in Southeast Asia, or has the capacity to do that, because there is a number of other considerations to make, especially for those of us that have families. So, in that sense, I think that the situation is becoming even more detrimental in that sense, which also has a psychological impact, because then you are constantly pressured. And at the same time, you need to be teaching and you need to handle some admin stuff and – you know, I don’t want to sound like I’m complaining, but I think that if you compare what was the value of the salary paid into academics twenty years ago, like what could you actually do with that money, and what you can actually do at the same level now, you can see that almost there’s a push by the education sector that academia is not even worth it financially, but also mental health wise, because unfortunately the system that we are in, if we don’t have some sort of financial stability, then that leads to instability in dozens of other sectors.”

Focus group 3

Precarity

Key Findings

- Contributes significantly to feelings of stress and anxiety.
- Administrative errors regarding contracts and payment unnecessarily add to experiences of precarity.
- Highly qualified and experienced ECRs remain on hourly-paid contracts.
- Precarity is exacerbated for those on visas.

“ I line manage some other researchers and precarity has quite a few different levels, because we’re getting to the end of our project and they’re getting to that point where – getting anxious, and I’m anxious because I’m in the same position, but [...] you’re stuck in this bind of trying to kind of advice people on the advice that you’re trying to give yourself, and trying to convince them even though you’re not convinced.”

Pilot focus group

“ FS3: [S]ome people will find that exciting. I certainly know people that don’t – you know, like I’m now about to take a contract that’s not permanent, that’s for like a period of years, and I’m kind of looking at it as like after that, it’s a good amount of time, I’ll do some teaching. If I stay, I stay, if I go, I go.

FS1: So for [some] people, it could be like the uncertainty or the challenge of putting a new proposal, it could be good, but for other people it could be very negative, not having that stability.”

Pilot focus group

“ Q: So you felt well supported?

FS1: Yeah, part of that, and also part of probably my personality, so I think it’s kind of a mix. But [...] from my family, my husband has a stable work, so we can have that security. So, if [...] my husband was working in academia maybe, in the same position, I could be singing a different story, right? So, it depends on your personal like background as well.”

Pilot focus group

“ [T]he first contract I had was a one-year contract, then I got a grant and it gave me slightly more certainty, but then the grant is over and now I’m again on one year contracts, which are on a rolling basis. I’m also on a visa in the UK, which adds several levels of complexity to any planning.”

Focus group 2

“ But even just the title that I have at LSE of a guest teacher, when I’ve been there for almost three years, I think is quite insulting [laughs]. But that’s the system, so... Yeah, so I’ll be done by – I’ve got an eleven-week contract at the moment and then I’ll get an extra contract for marking, and that’s about it, and then I plan to no longer be at LSE and develop my other positions. So yeah, I have gained a lot, but at the same time my experience is pretty precarious.”

Focus group 2

“ [J]ust on a practical level, I just wanted to add a story that I have various contracts at LSE, and the finance department last year – one month, I just didn’t get paid when I was expecting a pay cheque, and I contacted them and they said that they’d forgotten to contact me, and told me that there has been an error with my previous pay cheques that had been so complicated that I didn’t notice it, and to correct their error, they just weren’t going to pay me and they hadn’t mentioned it. So, that kind of level of precarity where you’re expecting income to come into your account with no notice is just, yeah, something that’s happened.”

Focus group 2

“ one year contract is horrendous. [...] If you put me through this long selection process, give me a three-year contract with one year probation period. If you want to fire me after one year, fire me after one year. Because as a person on a visa, every time I get a new contract, I have to pay for a new visa. A new visa in the UK is thousands of pounds. I can't leave the country while the application is in process. It never works well. The Home Office is not treating anybody well. So, it's absolutely unnecessary pain. Now all Europeans are going to have to go through the same process, which usually makes things better because they are more, so they're going to complain more hopefully. [...] But I see no reason – and I understand that funding is short, but I think one year probation period is as good as one year contract.”

Focus group 2

“ If your contract is running out, you should kind of get ahead of that situation way earlier than three months, so that should be six months or more, just to give everybody the time and space. Because yeah, recently, I've had like contracts renewed like on the day that they're expiring and it's just like a terrible, terrible situation.”

Focus group 2

“ The schools know exactly what they're doing, right? I mean, I think they know that they've hired a lot of casualised staff, and that they're doing this deliberately because they need labour to teach their courses.”

Focus group 2

“ As well as getting rid of one-year contracts, they should get rid of hourly paid positions. I have like twelve-week contracts, but I know LSE was apparently a pioneer in setting up this hourly pay system, so again they probably know exactly what they're doing there.”

Focus group 2

“ We are always feeling that, well, we are jumping from one short-term contract to the next without knowing what is going to happen, say, in a month, in a year or two, right? And yeah, this is a source of stress and uncertainty.”

Focus group 3

“ I find that the uncertainty [...] is related to especially what kind of job you want in the long run and how you should be approaching for it. You apply to some positions in the meanwhile, and you expect something out of it but somehow you get rejected, and [...] this is a little bit stressful because on top of the teaching and everything, you are trying to improve your research applications, and somehow you get rejected, and then it's a little bit demotivating.”

Focus group 3

“ I am still very surprised by how new liberal the British higher education is, and I think this is very detrimental in terms of career prospects, because this creates an incentive for university to create short-term jobs [...] I've been around for almost four years and I'm still not used to the level of precarity in the higher education in the UK. When we compare the number of fixed term jobs available to the number of say open contracts, my goodness, this is scary. There is a very heavy focus on short-term employment [...] LSE is not struggling with money, but the reliance of British academics on, for instance, international students, so they can charge higher fees, right, to make ends meet, creates a financial – well, this combined with the lack of public support to universities I think creates a very damaging dynamic in the job market, 'cos it makes British universities very vulnerable to external shocks, so to speak. If there's an important global event then most of the jobs will focus on that area, right, and then getting a more permanent job, a more secure job becomes very unpredictable, right, very hard. My impression is that it's very hard to plan long-term in British academia.”

Focus group 3

“ I think certain events haven't made it helpful, because for example the fact that after Brexit the UK universities are out of Horizon projects, like EU projects that could have provided other avenues, for example, that are available in some Continental European universities, in addition to the ones that exist in the higher education in the UK, has been detrimental.”

Focus group 3



“ [F]or me the uncertainty is related to the academic field in general, and I think I knew when I was in the job market that, the higher the level of the school will be, the more uncertainty I will face.”

Focus group 3

“ The precarity of life as an ECR was not known to me until I experienced it. If PhD life is precarious, life after the PhD is a continuation of uncertainty. ECR means different things. I have fifteen years of working for NGOs and international organisations but I am still considered an early career researcher at LSE and my pay was designated bottom of the pay scale for researchers.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

“ Constant worry about the future – am I competitive enough to get a lectureship? Or will I get stuck in early-career positions? Constant worry about having to balance two competing priorities: a) participating in life in my department and my university (which can also build my CV), or b) protect my time to do my own personal projects. Relatedly, feeling (knowing, based on statistics!) that the institution at which I work has no intention of valuing me and offering me a path to a secure position. Instead, I must autonomously prepare for my future – effectively, this means spending years working somewhere with the permanent feeling of preparing to leave that place (instead of investing yourself in that place to try and stay in it). As a result, I don't feel like I really belong in my place of work.”

ECR Experiences Qualtrics Survey

Visa-related pressures

Key findings

- The temporary nature of ECR contracts often aligns with the duration of the visa, creating uncertainty around ability to remain in the country beyond the contract period. This uncertainty can disrupt career planning and personal stability.
- The pressure to secure ongoing employment or sponsorship for a new visa adds an additional layer of stress, impacting job satisfaction and overall well-being. The stringent requirements for visa extensions, including proving continuous employment and meeting income thresholds, can be onerous.
- The risk of visa expiration may lead to disruptions in research projects and academic collaborations.
- Visa restrictions can limit supplemental opportunities for research, networking and skill development which have subsequent career implications.
- The lack of a clear pathway to long-term residency or citizenship for many academics on fixed-term contracts further exacerbates these challenges, potentially resulting in a loss of valuable talent for the UK academic community.

“ For me specifically, I’m on a visa here, these one-year contracts, and they say, you know, “To be extended after one year,” but it always comes down to the wire. Like I’m in the process now, I have one month left on the visa and the contract is just saying I have to apply again, I’m like, what if it doesn’t come in time? I’m going to be thrown out of the country. So, it’s not just about profession, it’s about your residence or your home.”

Pilot focus group

“ [F]or some of us who are on visas, I mean, you can only dream about stability, and especially in the UK higher education sector because, you know, every time, you don’t know – I mean, I’ve seen jobs where they want somebody who’s got right to work, when you don’t have it, sometimes your colleague may get it. Sometimes there are jobs that also require you to be, you know, fifty percent, and you cannot do that on some particular types of visas.”

Pilot focus group

“ I applied through my husband. So, he’s the skilled worker and I’m dependent, and usually what happens is they – I’m not sure in LSE, but it might be the case that they fund the skilled worker but not the family members. So, we had to pay for my visa plus my two kids’ visas, plus everything, so at the end we had to pay like, I don’t know, £8,000, very expensive. And now I have to renew it. Now in April, it will happen again, so we will have to pay – so yeah, it’s an issue, it’s a big issue. [...] because you don’t have the visa, you have the uncertainty of – I can dream, I’m pretty confident that I will stay [in academia], but I know that it’s a limiting factor saying, okay, but I can’t predict myself into like longer time, because I have that constraint of the visa.”

Pilot focus group

“ [M]y wife is the main wage earner, but it doesn’t seem – I’m not aware of the LSE process, but I know that while she worked at, say, Amnesty International NGO, they paid for everything. When she changed into academia, they didn’t pay for it.”

Pilot focus group

“ [I]f it’s the global talent visa and it’s not one of those guaranteed fast tracks, and you’re trying to make a peer review case and all of those things, the official feedback I got via the department was, you know, “You’re kind of on your own. We can’t really advise. We can send you a generic FAQ and then when you get it, let us know if you switch.”

Pilot focus group

“ [F]or me, it was a very long process, because [...] the other problem is that people don't have experience of writing a letter that can support you. [...] It's just the confidence to go for it, and if you've got a contract. Because if you get a contract, an appointment then it's almost automatic. Also, the thing is, people don't have information about it and nobody gives information. [...] So for me, it's also that kind of awareness also to be created, also to the centres and to the departments also, how they can support, without leaving it only to the visa guys, because they don't know how to write letters. They can tell you, you know, "Try to have a letter written in such a way that you're not going to be refused," but it's also another thing to have conversations about how we can do it. I had to talk to someone who had written one and then I got advice on how we can do it.”

Pilot focus group

“ [T]he problem is that when you have a sponsor, they sponsor you for the five years before you become citizens, right, so you are kind of tied up to their rules. [...] I know that in the business sector, your progression is slower than British citizens [...] So thinking of academia, where your salary is not great, your career progression by default is – ECRs, I mean, the salaries are not great, the career progression can be slow, so [...] being an immigrant can slower the pace even more with all the consequences of salaries and uncertainties.”

Pilot focus group

“ I don't know if that's the case for all departments, but LSE's treatment of visaed employees is rather specific. So, if you're on a work visa, every Monday morning, you send a letter to an admin saying what you've been doing in the last week, you've been working from home, from abroad or from the office. It feels like I'm under a criminal charge. I know not all universities do that. I actually don't know any other university that does it, and I know that admin staff feel as awkward as people who are doing this.”

Focus group 2

“ The thing which I find financially stressful is that – because if you are an international student or an international person and then you are here on a visa, initially, we've got a contract for one year. Later, the fellow contracts are for two years. But when we had the contract for one year then we needed to actually apply for the visa, get it approved, you know, and then for the second year, when you get the contract, you again go through the same process. Obviously, we get the money back, but, you know, like since I recently got married, when you have a wife, when you have a dependent, things become a little bit complicated, so you have to pay for their fees. And given that the inflation is on the rise and then you have the rent, all the living expenditure has skyrocketed, then the amount of money you have is just not enough, that's the first thing.”

Focus group 3

“ if you are on the skilled worker visa, you are usually only allowed to work whatever is assigned to you, so you cannot go for any supplementary kind of work of a different nature. So, you have to actually try to seek an opportunity inside the role you have, which is very difficult, because you don't usually get that. Now, when somebody's on the skilled worker visa, they've really got stability in terms of, you know, this visa process, where if they are on the global talent visa or, you know, at least another visa, the citizenship will be settled. But this process is also tricky, and then you need to find a job. That's when things become financially stressful, because now they have increased the surcharge as well as visa fees, and you know that, moving forward next year, the expenses are going to be double, and your salary is just going to be similar, right, and that's the problem.”

Focus group 3

Advice issues

Key findings

- ECRs at LSE are provided with varying advice about pursuing academic careers. It is highly dependent on *who* you work with.
- Advice from senior academics is often at odds with the job application process or may be outdated. ECRs tend to rely on networks and colleagues at similar career stages.
- Having more centralised hubs of information is necessary.

“ [In my department] I’m the only person under forty probably in the department, and I’m quite a bit under forty, who is not like on a fixed term postdoc, externally funded research position. [...] because everybody’s kind of much older and they’ve been in the department since like the year dot, it’s quite difficult to get opinions on what I should do and what the expectations are, ‘cos everybody’s kind of like, “I already know this.”

Pilot focus group

“ [S]enior staff in the department will give me advice around how to publish research and research directed, but the assigned mentor for fellows in the department is a teaching track person, so the feedback and the mentorship advice is not – it’s more teaching related. And then I’m told, okay, it’s good to, you know, get small grants and projects, okay, fine, we’ll apply for that. Then I’m liaising internally and then I’m told, “You can do this as long as it doesn’t take time away from teaching, so it should be a very small part of your time.” So, the focus must be your research project, but it should not be the main thing you’re doing. You should be doing teaching.” So, it’s just like every signal is a bit different, and so how to navigate that is tricky.”

Pilot focus group

“ [S]ometimes you can only do research and nothing else because you are never given an opportunity, depending on the type of centre or institute that you are embedded in. And so you find that maybe if you are supposed to get experience supporting students, you don’t get that experience because you don’t know at what corridors those opportunities for mentorship are given, and there is sometimes no intention to support everybody to get experience with mentorship, you know. [...] So, it’s not like everybody gets an opportunity. Sometimes you’ve got either to plan it or look out for it.”

Pilot focus group

“ I think the things are out there, right? If you want to be proactive, you can be, but signposting is not always that clear. If you have a good line manager or a mentor, that’s really kind of fundamental, but if you have to find the information yourself, it usually takes quite a few years of being here.”

Pilot focus group

“ the imposter syndrome is high, just like everybody else. [Inaudible 0:49:40] you know it, and then you kind of feel silly asking ‘cos it seems like everybody knows, but really nobody knows and everybody’s sort of winging it. So, it’s just like we need to like verbalise it and like make sure that everybody is signposted correctly.”

Pilot focus group

“ I think it really depends on the person, because I also talk to different professors from time to time, and one of them told me not to apply for postdocs because it’s a waste of time and that I should apply for a permanent position like immediately, so it’s like completely different from what the job market looks like now.”

Focus group 1

“ I think the most useful advice I got from an older professor was that uncertainty is inevitable when you are an early career researcher, so you just have to learn how to manage it, and I know it’s advice that I found psychologically helpful.”

Focus group 1

“ I’m dealing with the reality of a contract that’s probably going to be very short, which in a way, I realise that it’s the norm in many ways, but at the same time that means that my mentor will have a very, very limited investment in me as a scholar, and in that way that also means that I am finding myself in a situation where there’s probably going to be a lack of mentorship very soon, and that’s very – in my situation, that’s dependent on the nature of the contract per se. So, what I can do is – and what I do is I rely on my community, but it’s not necessarily the same as having a mentor that can really sort of advise on the kind of career that I hope to have.”

Focus group 1

“ I think my guidance was generally limited, if I’m being honest. You just kind of feel like groups like ECR networks or your own self-formed groups and tribes end up being far more valuable than anything that you ever formally get. Like I’ve been in mentoring schemes and, you know, have had several career development chats with different supervisors and things like that, and just largely like a lot of people just kind of guide you towards the fellowships. Because I guess from your – or this is what my experience has been, my line manager has employed me to be on a particular project or series of projects, or for a particular reason, and so anything outside of that sort of seems to be outside their scope, and so they’re supportive for anything I want to go for. They’re like, you know, happy to support my applications, write me letters of reference, but it’s not like my career development is something that is like their sole responsibility. I’ve always just felt this, that it’s in my hands, I have to kind of be proactive about searching and bringing things to them for them to sort of comment on or sort of things like that. But the guidance that I have received that’s sometimes valuable, sometimes isn’t, has largely always been outside of those formal support structures.”

Focus group 2

“ I received very good guidance, I would say, as a PhD student. Once on the job market, once an early career researcher, I think so much of the guidance depends on who you’re dealing with. So, I have a mentor at LSE, who’s also my former supervisor, and I know that, you know, if I ask him anything, he will absolutely help, but I have to ask.”

Focus group 2

“ I think that the other problem is I think there’s two bits of advice – there’s sort of the formal guidance that you’re given and then the informal one that you pick up from offhand comments that you hear or things that you read around. So, I think that that is the other – I think that within academia there are some people that will give you a certain kind of guidance, but then don’t believe it themselves, and will then again go say things like, exactly that, if you don’t have a permanent position after three years then you’re obviously – maybe you should be reconsidering your career options, whereas I think that’s not necessarily the case anymore with the way that academia is right now. So, I think that there’s sort of the official guidance and then there’s the unofficial one, and I think that those are not always easy to navigate.”

Focus group 2

“ When I was there, she was the person who helped PhD students and early career researchers, and she is brilliant, so I can only say very good things about her. I went to her when I was a second year PhD student, to ask questions, “Okay, how should I prepare for the next couple of years? And each year, we met until I finished my PhD multiple times, and she gave very good suggestions on what to focus on, what are the career destinations, how to put together a cover letter, what should be in the presentation, and so on. So, I think what I found is that the existing support provided by LSE is really good, which is outside of the department. Within the department, I think it really varies. I have a really good relationship with my supervisor still, and we were publishing together when I was doing my PhD, so he was very invested in me getting a good position. And whenever I’d get a job interview, for instance, he organised these mock interviews and stuff like that. But again I don’t expect that it’s done by everyone.”

Focus group 2

“ Something that people have raised with me is that sometimes the mentors are senior professors who have not been on the job hunting side for decades, don’t always have the best perspective because they don’t know what it’s like. And I find that at UCL, there was a very good system there where the teaching and learning centres actually set up what they called a pilot scheme for the new lecturers, where it was kind of overseen by the person facilitating – so, there’s a formal structure, but it was more about the lecturers talking to one another and giving peer support, and just hearing their experiences was somehow very, very helpful, I felt. And then we would get advice from the facilitator were it needed.

In terms of my line managers at LSE, didn’t really get much, and then my line manager at UCL just gives me kind of training session suggestions. But I think broadly overall, working in the context, in my area the job market’s just incredibly difficult, so I think that also has to be acknowledged.”

Focus group 2

“ I also found informal networks more useful than formal networks, and sometimes – so, it feels like it’s very people dependent. So, my line manager’s very helpful, but I don’t think it’s because generally all line managers are helpful. It’s because my line manager is very helpful. And my former PhD supervisor still provides a lot of support, but there would be other people – I’m part of a formal mentoring programme and I haven’t seen my mentor once in three years because it’s really not that – that programme was not productive to me. And yeah, the good thing though which I found is that when I want to talk to people who are not my formal mentors or not part of whatever hierarchical structure immediately, they’re usually open to sharing. If you come and ask questions, they can answer questions, write a reference or be helpful. So, I think that is valuable. Of course, I have to ask for it, but at least people agree to do that, and every time they agree, next time I feel slightly less awkward at asking, because last time it was already agreed, so that’s already easier.”

Focus group 2

“ I’m going to start my fourth year of postdoc now, and this is what I was told, graduating from my PhD, that I didn’t find a job in four years or you can change it, but the more advice I seek on that, the more it looks like it reflects the job market ten years ago. But now we have people who are doing predocs. Now, to get a PhD, you need to do a predoc, so it’s all a bit crazy, and I think that it’s unnecessary pressure, and it’s also a trade-off of – you can get a job, but is it a job that you want to trade your postdoc position for if it’s permanent but it’s not something that you want to do? So, I guess it’s getting more complicated, and in that sense talking to people who are earlier from the job market was more helpful to me than talking to people already established and they operated in a different job market, where you finished Masters, started PhD, finished PhD, got an assistant professor position, which is not happening anymore.”

Focus group 2

“ The other thing that I remember really worked when I was a PhD student was when they created the PhD academy. So, having something similar to provide guidance, rather than to PhDs, actually to early career researchers, because you are in a different position.”

Focus group 2

Impact of working conditions on personal life

Key findings

- The pressure to establish a research profile, publish prolifically, and secure funding creates a relentless work pace that often spills into evenings and weekends.
- The precarious nature of short-term contracts or postdoctoral positions can lead to constant job insecurity, causing stress and anxiety about future career prospects.
- The financial strain of limited funding opportunities and modest salaries can impede personal aspirations and delay major life milestones, such as homeownership or starting a family.

“ Because you’re precarious and you are doing these research projects – like I spent a lot of the last year travelling back and forth to Indonesia, which is fantastic, I love being out there and stuff, but it does take an impact on taking chunks of your – not only your work life, but your actual private life away from you. [...] And you do that because you are kind of precarious and you don’t feel that you have the ability to say that, you know, life has to come first.”

Pilot focus group

“ [W]riting sometimes from 6am this morning, and just worried – and in a positive way also, just, you know, like hoping that this writing, publishing can make a difference, so it’s defined by that sometimes lack of separation between the formal work and what you do every time when you have a minute.”

Pilot focus group

“ For me, I guess it’s time usually, what I need to sacrifice, with my family. I have a little daughter and, yeah, I try to take it a funny way, but she used to call me Daddy until she was one and a half years old [laughs]. I think it was maybe a coincidence, because my husband also worked a lot. But it was when I used to tell people, people used to look at me like, “Oh, you are a non-present mum,” or something like that. But I think I’ll try to be present as much as I can, but I would say, yes, the workload impacts I guess on the time I can do other things, like giving time to my family.”

Focus group 1

“ [M]y partner is also an academic, so being in the distance relationship also doesn’t help, and I guess it’s usually the case in academic couples, especially at like early stages, that they’re in different places, so it’s pretty hard to manage that.”

Focus group 1



Conclusions and considerations

This qualitative investigation sought to understand the experiences of ECRs at LSE, to help shape the ECR network in supporting the ECR community. The findings provide a basis for future investigations across the School – both qualitative and quantitative – enabling the ECR network to assess and evaluate what change may be necessary, and how such change can be implemented. Based on findings across focus groups, considerations for the future have been grouped together under three main sub-headings:

Career Development

- All main themes identified in our analysis highlight ECRs concerns surrounding their career development. Whilst many ECRs are successful in obtaining opportunities for career progression, it is evident that more guidance is necessary.
- The Career Development Review (CDR) process at LSE is beneficial in assessing career progression, however some adjustments may be necessary for more fruitful outcomes. For example, including prompts within this process for the line manager/academic supervisor around guidance for career progression will mitigate varying advice that ECRs are provided with across the School. Additionally, a greater recognition of what activities or work ECRs engage in outside of their main responsibilities, along with their career ambitions, will promote transparency, reduce ambiguity, and will empower individuals to make informed decisions about their career development.
- A central developmental fund to which ECRs can apply to use for conferences, travel, training and other networking opportunities will increase equity.



Communication

- Enhancing the experience of ECRs at LSE is dependent on communication across, and within the School.
- Town-hall style meetings for ECRs will provide a platform for open communication and transparency. These forums will offer the School the opportunity to directly address and engage with a large ECR audience, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. Attendees will gain valuable insights into academic goals, strategies, and challenges, promoting a better understanding of the institution's vision.
- Whilst a town-hall currently exists at LSE for academic staff, it is evident that some ECRs often face personal or professional difficulty in engaging with senior members of staff, which exacerbated by a lack of understanding in how institutional decisions and policies are made. If chaired by the ECR network, this forum will facilitate two-way communication between the School and ECRs, enabling the latter to voice concerns, ask questions, and contribute ideas. This inclusive approach enhances morale, encourages collaboration, and strengthens the overall academic culture by creating an environment of trust and shared responsibility.

Community

- To strengthen the teaching and research community at LSE, ECRs expressed a desire for increased engagement with their peers.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring offers numerous advantages, leveraging shared experiences and mutual learning between individuals with similar levels of expertise. The dynamic fosters a sense of connection and empathy, promoting increased engagement and motivation. This approach is flexible and accessible, often more convenient for participants, and encourages the development of strong communication and interpersonal skills. Beyond individual growth, peer mentoring contributes to diversity and inclusion by bridging gaps among individuals with different backgrounds, creating a supportive environment for collaboration. Confidence-building is a key outcome, providing mentees with empowerment and a safe space to share ideas.
- The cost-effective nature of peer mentoring, relying on existing relationships, makes it an efficient strategy for organisations. Additionally, peer mentoring facilitates timely information exchange, ensuring that insights are current and relevant within a shared context. Networking opportunities arise naturally, as participants build connections both within and outside their organisation, expanding their professional reach. Collaborative problem-solving is a central benefit, allowing mentees to seek advice and solutions from peers who have faced similar challenges. Overall, peer-to-peer mentoring stands out as a dynamic and effective method for personal and professional development, offering a range of benefits that contribute to a positive and inclusive organisational culture. With the School supporting the ECR Network, a peer-to-peer mentorship programme designed by ECRs, for ECRs, will undoubtedly foster a strong sense of community.



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info.lse.ac.uk/ECR-Network

We hope that you will join the ECR Network, you can find more information on the [website](#) and can sign-up to the **LSE-ECR-Network** on Teams to engage with the community, and receive notifications of our news and events.

