

Addressing challenges faced by Early Career Researchers in European transnational projects

About the Project

This policy brief builds on insights from the EUROMOBI Conference, part of the EU-funded EuroMobi project (Horizon Europe, Grant No. 101232335), which explores mobility, demographic change, and socio-economic resilience in Europe.

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The Context

The precarious situation of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) is not a new phenomenon. General challenges and issues have previously been identified, and recommendations and action points made (see bibliography). This brief highlights some of the challenges and issues that ECRs in collaborative transnational environments in the humanities and social sciences face, as well as recommendations for tackling them.

“Instead of a stable and secure future, new academics face an insecure roller coaster in a constantly changing environment.”

This is a call to action for academia, funding bodies and other policy makers to:

- Equip ECRs with the skills and knowledge needed to progress and hold leadership roles in collaborative projects.
- Strengthen transnational collaboration between academics and invest in related research and knowledge exchange.
- Enable the building of national and transnational networks, by and for ECRs.
- Create funding schemes that provide ECRs with guidance and mentorship and offer them job security within academia.
- Aid in bridging the gap between academia and non-academic employers and partners by raising the profile of the transferable skills that ECRs have to offer.

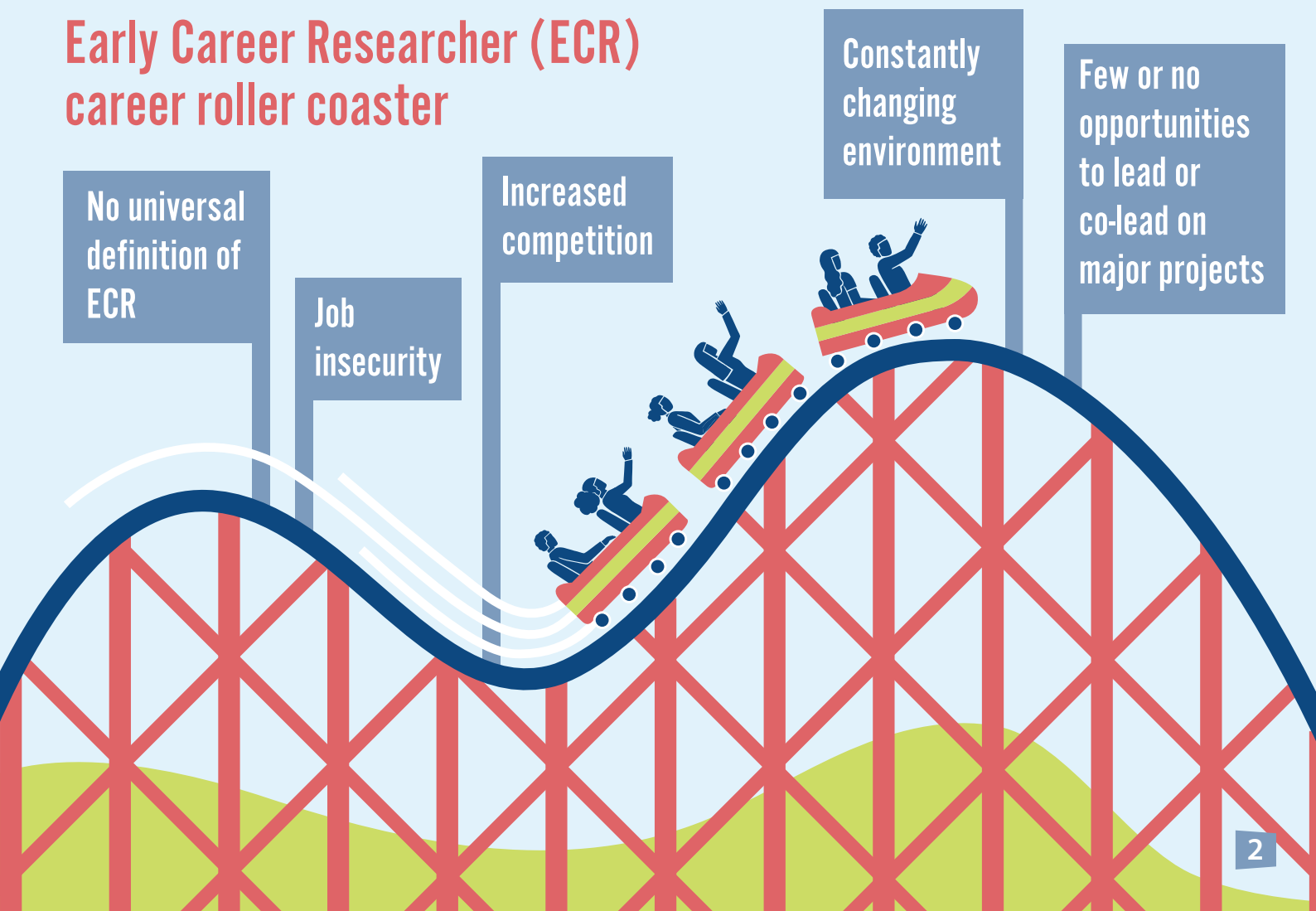
The Challenge

The days when the completion of a PhD served as a guarantee for an academic or other professional career are long gone. Instead of a stable and secure future, new academics face an insecure roller coaster in a constantly changing environment. ECRs in Europe are currently at a crossroads of great opportunities and great challenges. With an increase in individuals seeking academic careers, it is increasingly difficult to secure a position, let alone a permanent one. Fixed term and part-time employment make it logistically and emotionally very challenging for ECRs to plan and build their future.

Moreover, there is no universal definition of an ECR. Some institutions or traditions include PhD students in their definition and others do not. The duration of how long someone is classified as an ECR - and when they officially become an ECR - also varies.

This brief derives from the plenary session “Navigating opportunities and challenges: Early Career Researchers in transnational projects”, held on Friday 6th June 2025 as part of the Europe and Mobilities EU Presidency conference in Warsaw. Featuring both PhD and post-doctoral researchers, the session focused on the lived experiences of four ECRs who are part of Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe (CHANSE) transnational research projects. Their cases highlight the complex realities of these future leaders.

Early Career Researcher (ECR) career roller coaster



Individualism vs. Collectivism in Academia

Despite the wide range of collaborative, team-based research practices, academic rewards and prestige still tend to favour the individual, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. This individual-orientated ethos is evidenced in the value placed on single-authored papers, in funding schemes focused on individual fellowships, and in projects with single Principal Investigators (single PI). As discussed at the conference, Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe (CHANSE) is a departure from the traditional single PI approach, seeking to **foster transnational cross-sector collaborations between academic and non-academic partners**.

While ECR funding schemes exist, they tend to be targeted at ECRs in the role of single PI, rather than as co-leaders in transnational collaborative consortia. Without extensive networks built over time, or long-term or permanent employment (as might be the case with senior academics), ECRs are likely to be at a disadvantage or entirely excluded from collaborative transnational funding opportunities.

University internal funding opportunities which support cross-departmental collaboration within the same institution are not yet ubiquitous across Europe. However, these internal research collaborations offer ECRs vital opportunities to expand their network and gain experience in academic leadership, both of which are vital for their career progression.

Recommendations

For academia

- **Create collaborative leadership (co-leadership) opportunities for ECRs.** ECRs need to be prepared for future leadership roles within research projects. To do so, they must practice collaborative work and leadership by holding co-leadership roles within their departments and organisation (e.g. cross-departmental collaborations, co-chairing of academic panels, co-chairing and organising of academic events).
- **Support cross-institutional, national ECR networks,** to organise events and conferences, invite external speakers to facilitate training on matters identified by ECRs themselves, thus giving ECRs a space to lead on their own identified development needs.

For funding bodies and other policy makers

- **Develop transnational collaborative funding schemes targeted at ECRs,** focused on disciplines that traditionally lack collaborative funding opportunities, such as the social sciences and humanities.
- **Support and provide funding opportunities for transnational ECR networks and infrastructures.** To achieve the greatest impact, these should be open to ECRs involved in grant funded projects, independent or employed researchers. These networks will allow ECRs to build connections across Europe, and form relationships which can build the basis for future transnational collaborative projects (see the [International Migration Research PhD Network](#) or the aims of the [European Association of Social Psychology's \(EASP\) summer school](#) as examples of doctoral researcher-focussed opportunities, which could also be expanded to the post-doctoral level).
- **Ensure talent retention and job security in the humanities and social sciences** through funding schemes that advance the recommendations adopted by the Council of the European Union on attracting and retaining talent ([Council of the European Union, 2023](#)). The Initiative for Science in Europe ([ISE, 2024](#)) provides further recommendations on job security and funding schemes for ECRs.

Mentors and Autonomy

The challenges of early career research underscore the importance of strong networks where ECRs can meet their peers and ideally receive ECR-specific continuing professional development, but also meaningful mentorship.

Mentors play a crucial role in ECRs' career development. It is often through them that ECRs build connections, learn how to apply for positions and how to write and publish articles, and learn (often through observation) about academic leadership and progression. Often holding multiple identities when dealing with ECRs, mentors can be the ECR's colleague, supervisor, line manager and/or project PI. As such, the role of mentor can have a significant impact on an ECR's work, research and research autonomy. However, there is also the risk that if an ECR does not have the right mentor, or if their mentor lacks key skills or models poor behaviours, the ECR's career might suffer.

A project's diverse needs shape and define the work and research that is being conducted. However, **ECRs should have some space to practice autonomy.** It is through this practiced autonomy that mentors can enable and support ECRs to **develop their project management and research skills, make mistakes, and learn to become accountable for them.** These skills and lessons are crucial in building a solid foundation for ECRs as future research leaders.



Recommendations

For academia

- **ECRs need to practice research autonomy and develop mentoring skills.** As future leaders, ECRs should have some autonomy in conducting their research and allocated tasks, from reflecting candidly on their failures and successes, to shaping research questions, methods, analytical procedures and conclusions, to mentoring undergraduate and other budding researchers.
- **Deliver international collaborative training opportunities for ECRs.** Done through formal training or through mentors, training should focus on collaborative projects, their development and management within an international context and should prepare ECRs for the next steps in their careers.

For funding bodies and other policy makers

- **Include transnational mentorship in funding calls.** To foster transnational collaboration and knowledge exchange, transnational mentorship should be included in transnational collaborative funding calls. This will grant ECRs and senior academics insights into different academic traditions and foster transnational collaboration amongst teams.
- **Expand on existing international exchange programs for ECRs.** Providing ECRs with the opportunity to integrate themselves in different academic environments will not only help them expand their existing networks but also equip them with important knowledge and skills that will aid them when navigating future transnational projects.

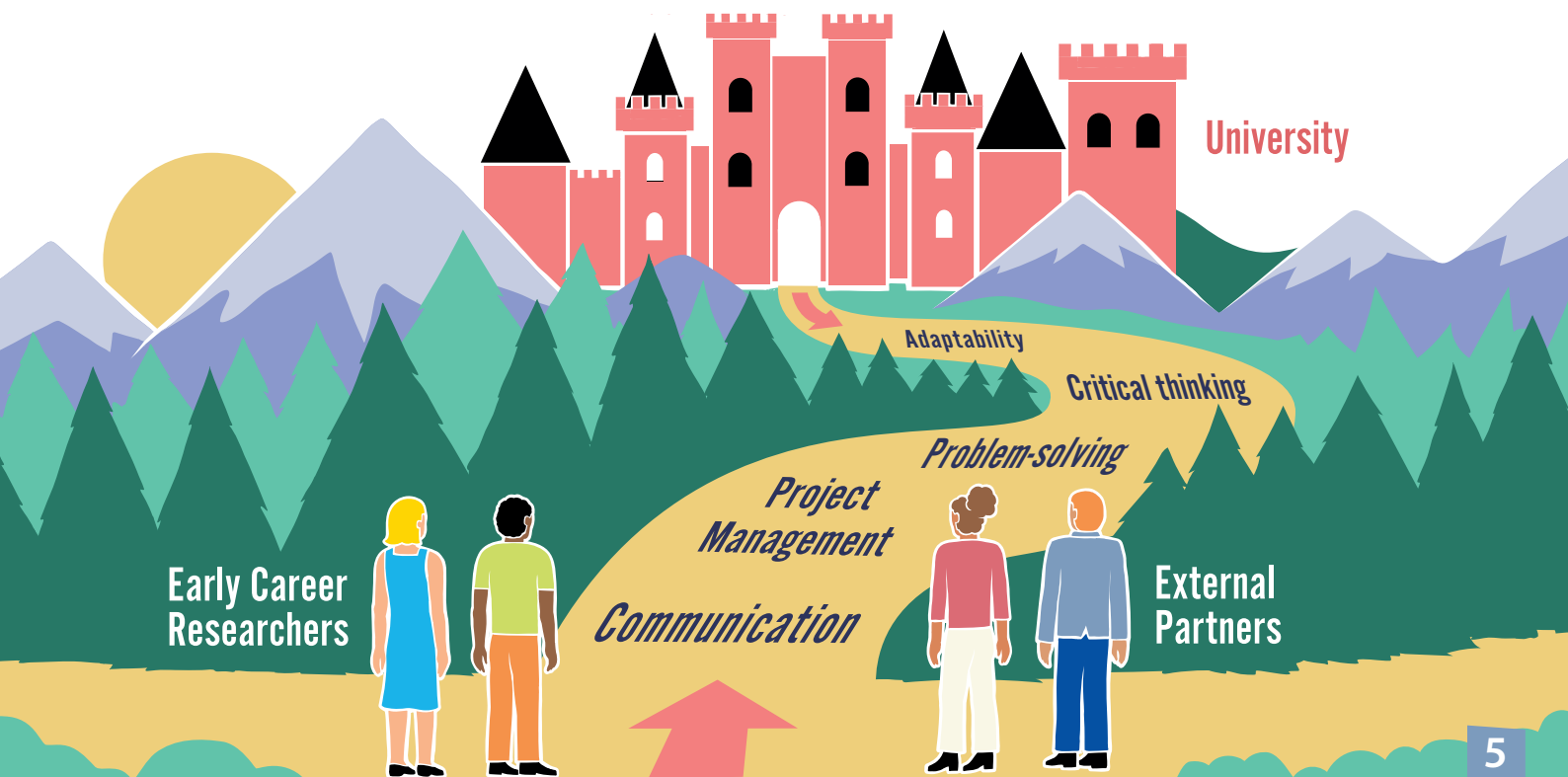
Skills, Partnerships and Legalities

Pathways into an academic career are varied: some ECRs continue their journey from degree to degree to academic employment, while others take time to travel, start a family or follow caring responsibilities or work in industry or other sectors between studies.

Regardless of their pathway, **ECRs will acquire transferable skills throughout their journey**, which can be applied within and beyond academia. However, depending on an individual's experiences, they might struggle to see the relevance of different skills in their current context. Equally, their employers or institutional affiliations (whether academic or not) might also undervalue the ECR's skillsets. Even at the disciplinary level, we see such tensions: the social sciences and humanities arguably lag behind others in **recognising the value of collaboration between academia, industries and stakeholders, and the crucial importance of collaborative skillsets.**

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National and international laws, such as **GDPR**, also play a role in the success of partnerships between researchers and partners outside of academia. **Researchers are often faced with countries interpreting and implementing the laws differently, resulting in different processes at institutions (e.g., related to the handling of personal data), and amongst project partners.** In addition, different rules, regulations, and attitudes may affect how external partners can be involved in research projects (see the TETRARCHs consortium's **Guide to personal data in archaeological archives** for a UK-focused example). This is likely to be indicative of the culturally embedded relationship between academia and other sectors, including the levels of trust. It is therefore key for universities, funding bodies and other policy makers to invest, both through staffing and financial aid, in supporting transnational collaborative projects to bridge the gap between academia and potential external partners.



Skills, Partnerships and Legalities

Recommendations

For funding bodies and other policy makers

- **Provide dedicated support to knowledge exchange facilitators in navigating the legal and administrative complexities of transnational research.** To bridge the gap between academia and external partners and build a more collaborative future, it is imperative that successful knowledge exchange initiatives take place. To facilitate, there needs to be more administrative and legal support provided in developing suitable solutions for knowledge exchange and for ECRs operating in transnational collaborative projects. Contract law, intellectual property and other legal matters are often left to institutions to address, whose concern is usually to protect the institution – not the wider, cross-institutional partnership. Funding bodies and other policy makers must fill the gap to ensure the interests of the collaboration are upheld.
- **Implement transnational external partnership schemes.** These schemes should bring academia and external partners together, working on common questions or issues. The focus for these schemes should be on disciplines that traditionally lack such collaborations, such as the social sciences and humanities.
- **Provide funding for research into transnational collaborative research challenges.** To implement research-informed changes in existing policy, funding opportunities for research on issues faced within transnational collaborative research projects need to be created. The CHANSE-funded **Community Research Ethics Initiative (CREI)**, for example, explored conflicting ethical obligations between institutions and countries. They have compiled recommendations for funding bodies and universities on ethics-related matters (see CREI's report **Rethinking Research Ethics in Digital Times** for more detail), but this is just one example of many potential coordinated efforts to attend to transnational collaborative challenges.

For academia

- **Develop a knowledge exchange strategy which requires ECRs to engage with relevant and interested non-academic partners.** This will help to break down barriers between sectors.
- **Provide training opportunities for ECRs on how to navigate challenges in knowledge exchange facilitation,** including equitable and timely ways of facilitating and compensating for knowledge exchange, as well as legalities related to intellectual property, copyright and contractual work. Many of these topics are challenging for established academics, let alone ECRs.

Concluding Remarks

Early Career Researchers are the research leaders of the future, who will develop cutting edge innovations, direct academic thought and address social and planetary change. It is imperative to give them the structures, tools and skills highlighted in this brief. Established researchers and policy makers need to be allies and advocates, reflecting on and attending to the embedded, systemic barriers that hold back ECRs from achieving collaborative leadership potentials that may be offered to those in senior career stages.

Recommended reading

Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Report 169 (2024) The lives of early career researchers. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-lives-of-early-career-researchers.pdf>

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- Aneta Pieczka, Kozminski University and the **Humans in Digital Logistics (HuLog)** project
- Dorota Wójciak, Jagiellonian University and the **DIGITALISAM: Digital Islam across Europe: Understanding Muslims' Participation in Online Islamic Environments** project

Disclaimer

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