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Early career nurse researchers: insights, challenges, and strategies for success

The term early career researcher (ECR) is commonly used, although its meaning is expressed by a wide range of definitions which vary globally, and may be institutionally determined.^{1,2}

Length of time since the start or completion of doctoral training (or equivalent professional training) or a first academic appointment is often used by research councils such as UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) (see [Early career researchers – UKRI](#)). Stage of career is also sometimes referred to with early career researchers being a catch -all term for doctoral and immediately post-doctoral researchers as well as those making the transition to an independent research career (see [Early career researchers – UKRI](#)).

Increasingly, the challenges associated with such time-bound definitions of ECRs are being acknowledged. Many bodies which offer funding for ECRs (for examples, see [Early Career Research Fellowships – InterAct Hub \(interact-hub.org and Early career researchers: career and skills development – UKRI\)](#) now explicitly promote a more inclusive and diverse conceptualisation, recognizing that the diversity of research career trajectories will not narrowly follow such time-bound definitions. This is particularly important given how the scope of impacts of Covid has been, and continues to be, experienced. Indeed, training for ECRs at Universities also reflect this greater diversity. One example from the United Kingdom is [Glasgow Caledonian’s University Crucible Research Leaders of the Future Programme](#) which is designed specifically to support ECR career development, collaboration, impact, and communication of and engagement with researcher’s work. The programme eligibility criteria explicitly states:

“There is no standard definition of ECR. While many funders define this as 4 - 7 years after completion of a PhD, we recognise that research careers are diverse and trajectories may be affected by teaching and caring responsibilities.” ([visit website](#)).

Despite the confusion and plethora of different definitions, a common theme that appears to resonate across the literature is that ECRs tend to be at an early stage in their academic careers³ and can encompass individuals actively involved in research roles or other academic roles which require a grounding in the use of evidence and evidence-based practice.

ECRs in nursing research

Cleary et al.⁴ highlight the significance of research in nursing including its influence on evidence-based practice, safe patient outcomes and its contribution to nursing knowledge. However, despite the reported increase in nurses undertaking doctoral level research, a lack of progress for post-doctoral career pathways in nursing is reported in the clinical environment.⁵ In the academic setting, it is noted that ECR nurses face increased workloads with teaching responsibilities affecting the ability to undertake research activity – a problem exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Regardless of the setting, it is acknowledged that ECRs experience significant difficulties in career progression.⁷ Lee and Rolley⁸ write that obtaining a PhD is for many nurses, the beginning, and the end of their research career; this editorial seeks to raise awareness of some of the key challenges faced by ECRs and considers what is important in promoting success.

ECR research pathways, leadership, and support

Nurses are motivated to undertake research for many reasons, including in response to a clinical situations and being unable to find answers to practice related questions in the

existing literature.⁹ Despite this, unclear career pathways are cited as a significant barrier in progressing academic nurses' research experiences.⁷ Lee and Rolley⁸ describe the pathways for ECRs as ad hoc, citing the need for explicit and dedicated career routes. This is also asserted by Cleary et al.⁴ who state that ECR transitions can be supported with career advice, structured experience, and formal mentorship, which is led by seasoned staff, a theme that resonates with wider guidance on supporting ECRs in higher education.¹⁰

For nurse researchers who have achieved their PhDs, future career trajectories and involvement in research relies heavily on working in context with good leadership and where one's own leadership skills can be built and developed.¹¹ van Dongen and Hafsteindottir¹¹ highlight the importance of nurses taking the initiative and mapping out their career goals and the importance of seeking support from others to do this. According to Lee and Rolley⁸ leadership which enables ECR progression is a priority. Leaders should be inspiring, have the time and be genuinely interested in developing ECRs; moreover, they should be easily identifiable to ECRs.⁸ Smith and Laver² describe ECRs as vulnerable, stressing the importance of support to succeed - opportunities to be part of a research team can offer an encouraging environment providing the leadership and support required for ECRs to develop, and where available, formal mentoring schemes are advocated.¹

Organisational culture

Rice et al.¹² discuss how organisations which place greater investment in research also offer greater support for nurse researchers. This is because there is more research occurring which increases the opportunities for ECRs to engage with and learn from research activities. However, such opportunities can only be realised if ECRs are supported at a managerial and organisational level. This may include effective leadership and clear career

pathways as already discussed, but research also needs to be perceived as fundamental and valuable to nursing. Viewing research as ultimately beneficial for patients, rather than just an academic pursuit could help to develop a more research-led culture.⁵ From a practical perspective, ECRs have cited organisational failure to provide any backfill to enable them to conduct research as a barrier to their progression.⁷ Furthermore, Rice et al.¹² found that ECRs are held back by organisations placing greater expectations on teaching and practice, often at the expense of valuable research time and engagement. The current staffing crisis in the NHS¹³ coupled with the ever-increasing challenge of securing research funding may exacerbate this even further.

Opportunities and individual factors

Support for ECRs can be facilitated by clear pathways, individual and organisational support, but some responsibility must also rest with the ECR. There are many ways ECRs can be proactive in their own development which include networking⁸, seeking collaborations and mentorship^{4,8}, joining relevant committees^{1,4}, dissemination, acting as a journal reviewer and supervising research students.⁴ Engaging in such activities takes time and lack of this is identified as a challenge^{7,12}, therefore, whilst working in the clinical or academic setting ECRs need to have effective management skills. Siedlecki and Albert⁹ identified characteristics of research-active nurses which included curiosity, research awareness and self-confidence. Tenacity and resilience are also qualities needed by ECRs to be successful.²

As an ECR, identifying career aims may be straightforward – the challenge lies in how to achieve them. Whilst organisational and individual support can facilitate career pathways for ECRs, the ECR cannot rely on this to progress – they must take responsibility for their own skills development by fostering connections, seeking support and mentorship, and

undertaking activities which will facilitate their engagement and leadership in nursing research.

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