



# Research Culture Challenges Among Early Career Researchers: A Qualitative Study

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## OBJECTIVE

The challenges facing early career researchers (ECRs) differ from those encountered by researchers at later stages in their careers.

The aim of the present research was to identify challenges that impact ECRs, including postdoctoral researchers (PDRA) and graduate research students (GRS).

## METHODS

### Content analysis of open-ended survey responses

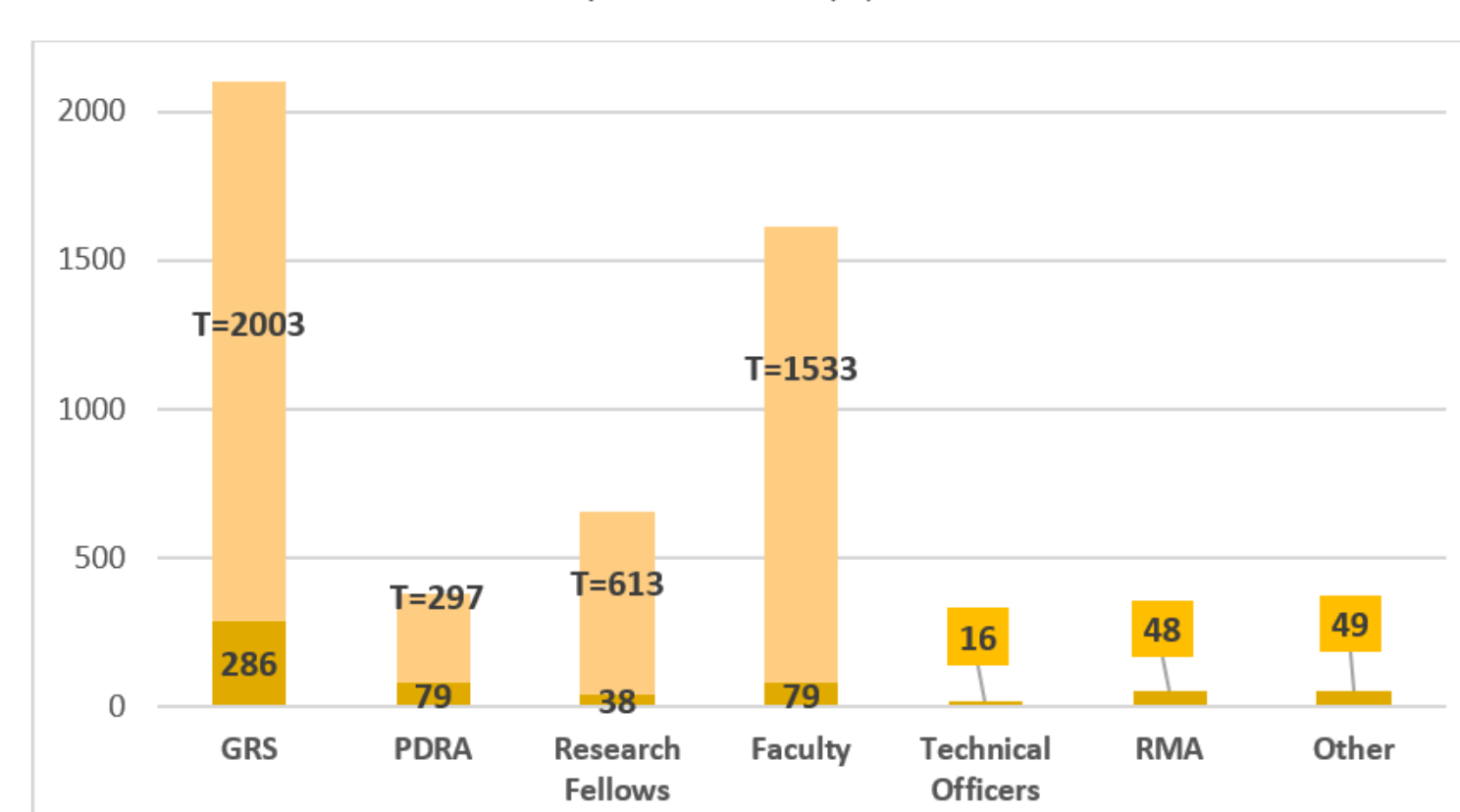
79 PDRA and 272 GRS from University College Dublin (UCD) responded to open-ended survey questions about research culture, as part of a larger survey on institutional research culture.

Reflecting on the past three years, do you think that research culture has improved at the university?

What university acknowledgement would you like to see for your research contributions?

As an institution, what one practical thing could we do to promote a positive research culture?

Figure 2: Response rate across roles. The total population (T) at UCD for GRS, PDRA, Research Fellows, and Faculty was determined by institutional statistics. For Technical Officers, Research Managers/Administrators (RMA) it was not possible to accurately determine total population at UCD.



### Focus Group Feedback

Additional feedback was obtained from 23 PDRA and 57 GRS through post-survey focus group discussions.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY RESEARCH CULTURE CHALLENGES AMONG ECRS?

- 1) precarity & stipends
- 2) training
- 3) mentoring
- 4) ambivalence of position.

## PRECARITY & STIPENDS

- The need for increased resources to support GRS stipends, which, in turn, would benefit academic staff, was expressed.
- The precarious nature of PDRA fellowships and their broader consequences should be considered by institutions.
- Short-term contracts with strict milestone requirements act as a key barrier to the development of external collaborations.

## TRAINING

- Few opportunities to discuss their research outside of their immediate research environment, was reported as a key challenge.

## MENTORING

- Uneven mentorship: greater focus on provision of structured and consistent mentoring for GRSs and PDRA is desired.
- Increased and/or mandatory training for supervisors would benefit ECRs.

## AMBIVALENCE OF POSITION

- There was a desire for increased acknowledgment of the vital contributions that GRSs and PDRA make in the overall research output of the University.
- GRSs reported that they would like to be recognised as “researchers in their own right”.
- PDRA reported feeling like they fall somewhere in between staff and temporary contractors, with an undefined status.

“ I find it unacceptable that so many people just have to put up with working under an unsupportive supervisor just because they don't want to put their degree at jeopardy if they complain. ”

“ I feel like there should be more support for PhDs as researchers. At present, many of us feel like we have the worst aspects of being staff and students without falling neatly into either category and without the benefits of either. ”

“ It would be helpful if the University gave greater visibility to research contributions of early career researchers (especially PhD candidates and postdocs). ”

“ Mentorship is not guaranteed. ”

## CONCLUSIONS

Identifying challenges faced by ECRs can highlight priority areas for future institutional changes. These challenges are likely not institution-specific, but rather reflect the broader research ecosystem.

To Learn more, visit: <https://www.ucd.ie/researchculture/>

