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The coronavirus crisis:

What impact for early career researchers?

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to impact on the everyday (working) lives of researchers, but perhaps no more so than on early career researchers (ECRs). During the early stages of the crisis there was much speculation as to how the higher education (HE) sector in the UK – and globally – might respond. Such speculation typically centred on financial reorganisation and, as the crisis has continued, universities have increasingly been engaging in such measures. While there have been calls for a government ‘bailout’ of the sector – with losses expected to be in the region of £2.5 billion (London Economics, 2020) – at the time of going to print, the UK government has only committed to providing heavily conditioned support to individual at-risk providers. Consequently, in an effort to protect their financial interests, universities are considering options ranging from delayed capital spending to redundancies and salary reductions (Guadagnolo, 2020). The initial response across the sector has been very uneven in terms of the support and protections offered to both permanent and casualised staff, as well as to postgraduate researchers (PGRs) (McKie, 2020).

The academic endeavour has been somewhat ‘broken’ for a considerable period of time, and the coronavirus crisis has brought this into sharp relief. ECRs have become accustomed to precarity as a part of their working lives, and many arguably accept this, despite

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the pressures it places on them. Precarity manifests in many ways for ECRs – from uncertainty regarding how they will support themselves when they do not complete their doctorate within prescribed timeframes, to the insecurity of undertaking multiple fixed-term contracts as a post-doc (in pursuit of a permanent post). The actions that universities are currently taking will only serve to further exacerbate such precarity, and the effects of such actions are already being felt by ECRs. A recent survey conducted by Vitae and the Student Mental Health Research Network (Vitae, 2020) highlighted that around two-thirds of ECRs are very worried about their future and finances, with only 10 per cent of those whose contracts end in 2020 having been granted extensions in the context of the pandemic, and only 12 per cent of final-year doctoral students reporting that their institution has provided an option to extend their studies.

There will likely be fewer posts available as a result of the pandemic, especially permanent ones, creating increased competition in a market that is already extremely competitive. Furthermore, working conditions are also at risk, especially for those on fixed-term contracts who have fewer protections with regard to employment law, making them vulnerable to exploitation. The coronavirus crisis will have consequences across HE, but ECRs will undoubtedly be disproportionately affected. The impact of the crisis will vary for different ECRs, however, and will not be equitable – certain ECRs will fare better than others, and not necessarily due to chance or merit. Universities are shrouded in structural inequalities, therefore any actions taken to support ECRs need to consider diversity in the broadest sense, otherwise already disadvantaged ECRs may be marginalised even further. Sector-wide campaigns and initiatives such as Fund the Future (UCU, 2020) and #CoronaContract (2020), and @PandemicPGRs on Twitter are much needed at this time, with all seeking to ensure that the long-term future of the sector is safeguarded and that ECRs are adequately protected. Such campaigns remind us that, while discussions about the shape of the new academic year understandably dominate the sector, we must ensure that discussions about the survival of its present and future workforce are not happening on the margins.

We have previously advocated for greater representation of ECRs within dialogues around measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis and to promote the sector's recovery (Djerasimovic & Hooper, 2020). While we have begun to hear from some ECRs, more need to be heard, as do the voices of those advocating for them, their supervisors, mentors and researcher developers. Accordingly, within this feature we present the views of two such academics. **Ross Goldstone**, a

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doctoral student based at Cardiff University, shares his perspective on living through the crisis as an ECR, while **Kay Guccione**, a senior lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University, considers how researcher developers might support ECRs at this time.

It should not have taken a global pandemic to make us 'wake up' and realise that current practice is not working. However, we must not ignore this awakening as the sector recovers. ECRs represent the future of the academy, and the way in which we conceptualise them must fundamentally change to ensure that they are given due recognition for the irreplaceable contributions they make.

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