

## **SRHE Annual Conference, 6-8 December 2017**

### **Paper proposal**

**Research Domain:** Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

#### **Title**

'Early' 'career' 'researchers' in the social sciences: Redefining the terms  
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#### **Part 1 Abstract** (max 150 words)

This paper draws on the findings of a research study for the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the experiences of early career researchers (ECRs) in the social sciences and, in particular, the extent and quality of support for postdoctoral researchers from research organisations, funding bodies and career services (Locke, Freeman and Rose, 2016). The aim of the research study was to gain an insight into the diversity of roles, opportunities and support available for (ECRs) in the social sciences whether they worked in the HE sector or not at the time of the study.

A definition of early career researchers was not prescribed and respondents were free to define themselves as such when deciding whether to respond to the survey. This paper will delve further into the respondents' perceptions of themselves as 'early career researchers' and analyse these according to significant variables.

(145 words)

#### **Part 2 Outline** (max 1,000 words, excluding references)

##### **Introduction / context**

There is evidence of an increase in the age at which academics in the UK obtain their first full-time employment in higher education (HE) (Teichler & Cummings, 2015). This may be partly due to the increasing requirement for a doctoral degree, although the time taken to complete a doctorate appears to have shortened (Galaz-Fontes & Scott Metcalfe 2015). This lengthening apprenticeship seems to reflect fewer opportunities, less stable working conditions and less predictable career trajectories for those starting out in academia. New career paths have developed, but they do not always offer the permanence and career progression that young academics are looking for (Finkelstein *et al*, 2015).

This paper draws on the findings of a research study for the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the experiences of early career researchers (ECRs) in the social sciences and, in particular, the extent and quality of support for postdoctoral researchers from research organisations, funding bodies and career services (Locke, Freeman and Rose, 2016). The aim of the research study was to gain an insight into the diversity of roles, opportunities and support available for (ECRs) in the social sciences whether they worked in the HE sector or not at the time of the study.

A definition of early career researchers was not prescribed and respondents were free to define themselves as such when deciding whether to respond to the survey. This paper will delve further into the respondents' perceptions of themselves as 'early career researchers' and analyse these according to such variables as gender, age, doctoral institutional location, quality of support received and discipline of study.

## **Methodology**

The first phase of the study consisted of an online survey of PhD graduates in the social sciences who described themselves as early career researchers. 1,048 usable responses were received. The second phase built on the findings from the online survey and consisted of interviews with a selection of the survey respondents (46% of respondents had agreed to participate in this follow-up). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 respondents who had studied at a range of types of universities with different funding sources. Eight were working outside academia at the time of the interviews.

Following this, interviews were also held with nine representatives of relevant research and other organisations, experts and individuals with a stake in the support and progression of ECRs in the social sciences. These explored the main issues raised by respondents to the survey and the 35 interviewees, the effectiveness of existing sources of support, and ideas for improvement.

## **Findings**

The evidence from the survey and the follow-up interviews would suggest that, for most respondents, undertaking doctoral study broadly resulted in their desired outcome: a role within academia. The majority of respondents (81%) worked in the HE sector immediately following completion of their doctorate, with nearly half in primarily research roles.

However, follow-up interviews with survey respondents revealed that while several interviewees did report being where they had originally intended to be, or on the way to realising their desired career goal, in most cases getting there had taken longer than they had expected, the journey had been extremely stressful, frustrating and not as straightforward as they had envisaged. Interviews revealed that there is no single common career trajectory for doctoral graduates. Almost all felt that they had taken a unique, unconventional and non-traditional path and interviewees reported a wide range of experiences on completing their studies from going directly into a permanent academic post to multiple short-term contracts. Many had constructed what might be termed a 'patchwork' or portfolio career. Aspirations and reality were therefore not always easily aligned.

Respondents commented on the need to develop a more realistic understanding and accurate portrayal of the difficulties of forging an academic career. Some felt that, if they had known this, they would have given more consideration to career opportunities outside academia from the start. However, many referred to an assumption by doctoral supervisors and other academics that a career outside academia following doctoral study is a failure.

## **Implications**

Given the findings from this study, we should avoid thinking of early career researchers as a homogenous group pursuing a traditional linear path from undergraduate and masters study through postgraduate research, a post-doctoral position and into full-time permanent employment as a lecturer in higher education. Indeed, the inability to follow a linear path into academia seemed to be the source of considerable disappointment and frustration among participants.

Moreover, the findings from this study suggest the need for broader definitions of 'early career researcher' that are not solely based on the time elapsed since the award of a doctorate, but also on the competence and expertise of the researcher. Nearly half (48%) of the survey respondents had been awarded their doctorate four or more years previously and nearly a quarter (24%) six or more years previously.

The achievement of a permanent academic position was mentioned by respondents but, as this could increasingly be in a teaching-focused role, even this is not sufficient as a marker in a research career. It would seem that successful experience as a principal investigator of an externally- (i.e. not university-) funded research project could be the significant factor that marks the transition from 'early' to 'mid'-career as a researcher (although, perhaps not yet 'senior'). A previous study of early career researchers in the arts and humanities similarly argued for a broader definition of 'early career researcher' (Renfrew & Green, 2014).

Partly as a result of this study, the ESRC has introduced a number of measures to recognise what it determined were three distinct ECR stages:

- Doctoral
- Immediately postdoctorate
- Transition to independent researcher

In particular, the ESRC introduced a New Investigator strand of its Research Grants scheme specifically aimed at supporting those looking to make the transition to an independent researcher through managing their first major research project.

This paper will go beyond such immediate and pragmatic responses to investigate the nuances in the perceptions of the ECRs and the implications for early career trajectories.

(999 words)

## References

- Finkelstein, M.J., Iglesias, K.W., Panova, A. & Yudkevich, M. (2015) 'Future Prospects for Young Faculty Across the Academic World' in Yudkevitch, M., Altbach, P.G. & Rumbley, L.E. (Eds) (2015) *Young Faculty in the Twenty-First Century: International Perspectives*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press: pps 321-350.
- Galaz-Fontes, J.F. & Scott Metcalfe, A. (2015) 'Changing Biographies and Careers of Academics', in Teichler, U. & Cummings, W.K. (Eds) *Forming, Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer: pps 23-50.
- Locke, W., Freeman, R. and Rose, A. (2016) *Early career social science researchers: experiences and support needs*, Swindon: Economic and Social

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