



NERC management response to the 2017/2018 independent report evaluating the support available for Early Career Researchers.

In 2017, NERC commissioned an evaluation of its support for early career researchers (ECRs) in order to gain a better understanding of the challenges and issues facing ECRs during this crucial period for their career development. The outcomes of this evaluation will inform NERC activities to ensure they are effective at maintaining a healthy research base for the environmental sciences, and ensuring the training and opportunities available for ECRs in NERC remit are appropriate for facilitating success in the broad range of careers they enter.

In order to ensure that NERC's policies and activities relevant to ECRs are appropriate, consistent, and aligned with NERC and UKRI goals, NERC will develop and implement a strategy to inform its support for ECRs.

The strategy will guide the delivery of actions and activities identified through this evaluation. It will be informed by the outcomes of this evaluation as well as good practice, and will be developed in collaboration with stakeholders relevant to this area to ensure that it is representative and inclusive of the diversity of issues relevant to ECRs. It will define both NERC's aims and objectives for its support of ECRs and the core mechanisms for ensuring NERC support achieves these goals.

NERC's responses to the individual recommendations within the independent report prepared by DJS Research Ltd are included below:

ECR Evaluation: Recommendations and NERC Responses

Recommendation 1: If possible, more long-term funding should be made available (e.g. more NERC research fellowships) in order to tackle career instability and improve the wellbeing of ECRs.

Response: NERC notes this recommendation and the report finding that career instability is a persistent issue impacting early career researchers negatively. However, further work is required to determine whether additional longer-term funding for ECRs, such as fellowships, is the most effective mechanism to address these issues including impact on their wellbeing.

Career instability is caused principally by the number of early career researchers considerably exceeding the number of permanent academic research positions available. Research fellowships provide a mechanism to support excellent early career researchers as they transition to positions of independence and leadership, but are not permanent positions. Investment in fellowships does not result in the creation of additional permanent academic positions and is therefore unlikely to address the issue of career instability for the majority of ECRs.

However, NERC recognises that it is well placed to provide additional support where appropriate to support ECRs to help mitigate the impact of these and other issues impacting ECRs relating to career management and well-being. This support is discussed in the management response to the recommendations below.



Recommendation 2: Although many recognise that mobility is important in order to develop research careers, extra consideration into the benefits of doing so could be applied on a case by case basis when reviewing applications.

Response: NERC accepts this recommendation and recognises that mobility is not the only means to acquire the skills and experiences necessary to build a research career. NERC will consider its assessment processes for its research fellowship funding competitions to reflect this and to better articulate different examples of evidence demonstrating research leadership potential.

Recommendation 3: NERC should consider developing mechanisms to allow ECRs to co-author / co-PI on large-scale grants and ensure input is acknowledged.

Response: NERC strongly supports this recommendation as the input of ECRs into successful grant applications must be recognised if they are to build a competitive research profile. NERC will amend its eligibility criteria to more clearly acknowledge ECRs as Research Co-Investigators where they have had substantive input into the development of grant applications.

Recommendation 4: More small, short-term grants that are targeted at ECRs (where they can act as PI) would be beneficial, so that ECRs are not competing directly with more senior researchers and are then able to build a good track record of grant application writing.

Response: The issues informing this recommendation differ dependent on whether the ECR is eligible to act as a Principal Investigator (PI) for NERC grants or not; this response is therefore separated into two parts acknowledging this distinction.

Working with its advisory bodies and within the context of establishing good practice within UKRI, NERC will continue to review and consider its grants schemes with the intention of ensuring ECR PIs are not disadvantaged at any stage of assessment and review. In addition, NERC will improve its support concerning grant management to ensure ECR award holders are aware of the responsibilities placed on them as PIs.

NERC does not currently offer standalone grants schemes for ECRs who are ineligible to act as PI; this requirement excludes a large proportion of the ECR population. NERC recognises that experience of acting as a PI is often important in securing grant funding and progressing within an academic career. Small, short-term grants also represent an effective mechanism for equipping award holders with skills relevant to grant management as well as additional broader skills and experience depending on the format and conditions of the grant.

NERC will work in collaboration with other stakeholders in this area to explore potential support to ensure that ECRs have opportunity to gain skills and experience relevant to grant application and management.

Recommendation 5: NERC should consider how it can work in partnership with ECR employers to improve availability and awareness of training and support opportunities. Considerations could include development of a code of practice for more structured ECR support, and working together to improve availability and signposting to information (online and offline) on professional development and careers advice for ECRs.

Response: NERC is a signatory of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers¹ and strongly supports this recommendation in recognition of the importance of training and support in ensuring ECRs are equipped with the skills and experiences to be successful across the wide range of careers they enter. NERC will work in collaboration with ECR employers and other stakeholders relevant to this area to build on existing best practice, such as the Concordat, and to identify suitable activities in which NERC engagement will be most effective in supporting the provision of impactful resources for ECRs to help them manage their careers.

¹ Vitae Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers - <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/concordat-to-support-the-career-development-of-researchers>



Recommendation 6: NERC should encourage supervisors / PIs to allow a set amount of time outside of research to be put aside for ECRs to attend relevant training.

Response: NERC strongly agrees that ECRs should be appropriately and formally supported to allow them to access training relevant to their career and personal development, and notes that this is principle within the Concordat. Responsibility for the provision of resources and engagement with training sits across a range of stakeholders including research organisations, ECRs themselves and NERC.

Through its central position, NERC is best placed to encourage and champion best practice across its community relevant to this area and will consider how this support can be facilitated through its grant assessment processes and the terms and conditions of its awards. Recognising the importance of training for ECRs across all disciplines, NERC will work with colleagues across UKRI when addressing issues in this area with the intention of harmonising any requirements across UKRI.

Recommendation 7: NERC should look to: a. Provide additional support, particularly in research management and careers outside of academia b. Encourage institutions to provide and promote training in all key areas mentioned c. Encourage professional bodies/learned societies to get involved with advice on careers outside of academia.

Recommendation 8: There is a need to improve support and training in careers outside of academia, from NERC, institutions and professional bodies / learned societies. This could include guidance highlighting the many transferable skills that ECRs possess, and promotion of non-academic careers as a viable and rewarding alternative to the academic route. ECRs in academia appear to be focussed on the academic career route suggesting a need for more upfront and frank discussions by NERC and ECR employers from PhD level.

Response to 7 & 8: NERC strongly supports these recommendations in recognition of the importance of ensuring ECRs are aware of the wide variety of careers open to them and supporting them to achieve success across any career path they may take. These discussions should take place at the outset of ECRs' careers as they will impact not just training but also career choices during this crucial period. The importance of this support is reflected in the requirements placed on NERC doctoral training award holders and NERC will be exploring the impact of these requirements as its students progress through their careers.

Career management training should form a key component of continuous professional development and undertaken throughout a career. A wide range of activities have taken place to date in this area, notably arising from the Concordat, but these evaluation outcomes indicate a need to ensure that ECRs are well informed of the career paths available to them and the value of their skills and expertise to industry, policy, and third sector organisations. Current career management resources for ECRs appear to be insufficient and of inconsistent quality and these issues must be addressed as a matter of priority to ensure this group of researchers is not overlooked for the provision of this support.

NERC is well placed to showcase and champion examples of best practice, and to work with stakeholders in ECRs to improve the communication and resources available to support career management. In addition to the above, NERC will consider how it can best support skills training in specific skills relevant to this area.

Recommendation 9: NERC should continue to give consideration to measures to encourage and support women in applying for funding, and consider funding strategies and policies specifically designed to influence gender and ethnic diversity.

Response: NERC is strongly committed to ensuring that all members of its community are treated fairly and have equivalent opportunities, regardless of their background and current circumstances. Diversity of backgrounds results in diversity of ideas and perspectives, which is vital for ensuring the continued excellence and resilience of the UK environmental research community. NERC will continue to work with colleagues across UKRI and other stakeholders to ensure that its policies represent leading practice in this area.

