How do researchers navigate their professional role and relationships?

Principal Investigators: Dr Steven Wooding (Research Strategy Office) & Liz Simmonds (Human Resources)

Before you agree to take part in this study, please review the information below which explains why the study is being carried out and what it will involve. If you are unsure whether you wish to take part, select ‘No’ for the question ‘I agree to take part in the study’ on the Participant Consent Form.

Purpose of the study
The dynamic between early career researchers/academics (ECR/ECA) and their principal investigators (PIs)/managers is formative in shaping academic careers. As highlighted by Kaps et al. (2018), this relationship can significantly influence researchers’ motivation and the collaborative atmosphere in knowledge construction.

In the context of the University of Cambridge, the Action Research for Research Culture team are exploring how early career researchers and research supervisors think about their respective roles and professional relationships. Using a selection of methods, we seek to capture how these relationships develop and how they are influenced by the broader research climate.

For researchers without a PI or formalised forms of research support, including those on teaching-only posts or individual research fellowships, we want to know how you regard your research activities and prospects, and how you go about establishing professional support for this work.

This selection of methods, called ‘Your Voice’, seeks to inspire diverse and honest submissions in ways that provide exploratory insight into the interpersonal aspects of the researcher experience.

Am I eligible to take part?
The study is open to the following:

Principal Investigators at the University of Cambridge

Early career academics employed by the collegiate university. This includes postdocs, teaching associates and research fellows.

How do I take part?
Participants are expected to

- Review the three options for Your Voice submissions. The different options vary in estimated time commitments and incentives. These are described in the next section.
Once you have chosen a submission format, you can complete your submission via the REDCap survey, where you will also be asked questions about your demographics and research background.

As part of the survey, we will ask you to indicate whether you are willing to be contacted for a follow-up research interview, which may take place in-person or online via Teams. During the interview, we will ask about the content of your submission and the nature of research experience and working relationships.

Writing prompts

There are three options for Your Voice submissions. The prompts have different time estimates attached to them, and you will be offered a voucher of either £10, £15 or £20 depending on the time requirement of the chosen prompt. You can only submit to one format.

Option 1: Three things
We estimate that this option will take about 5 minutes to complete. You will be offered a £10 lifestyle voucher to thank you for your efforts.

1. Write three things you wish you knew before starting your current role

2. Three things you are glad you knew when you started your current role

Option 2: Job description
We estimate that this option will take about 10 minutes to complete. You will be offered a £15 lifestyle voucher to thank you for your efforts.

If you are a postdoc or early career academic, please describe the job role of either yourself or your current Principal Investigator/research supervisor. It can be realistic, exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek or funny. You control the tone!

If you are a principal investigator or research supervisor, please describe the job role of either yourself or your current postdocs/mentees. It can be realistic, exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek or funny. You control the tone!

Option 3: Letters
We estimate that this option will take about 20 minutes to complete. You will be offered a £20 lifestyle voucher to thank you for your efforts. In this option we ask you to write a brief letter. The content of the letter is up to you, but you might want to discuss how you feel about the job you are doing, how you feel about research and academia more broadly, or offer some advice to the letter recipient.

You control the tone of your letter – it can be serious, funny or even a cathartic exercise. You might want to share thoughts that you do not feel able or willing to share in your day-to-day working
environment. You can address the letter to whomever you choose. If you name someone directly, we will remove any identifying information about this person during data analysis.

*If you are a postdoc or early career academic,* please write a letter to one of the following:

Your principal investigator/research mentor

Your PhD-self

*If you are a principal investigator or research mentor,* please write a letter to one of the following:

Your postdoc(s)/your research mentee(s)

Your postdoc-self

Your PhD-self

**What happens to my data?**

The research team will:

- Collect questionnaire data on yourself, some characteristics about your role, your previous work experience,
- Remove all identifiable characteristics from your submissions, including names of people and events.
- Analyse all participants’ responses.
- Report on findings only in anonymised terms.
- In some cases, include extracts from submissions in publications arising from the research and the Action Research on Research Culture project’s research culture showcase.

Where interviewees are happy to be recorded, we will use a program called Descript to transcribe those interview recordings. According to Descript’s data security policy the data they hold is encrypted at rest and in transit and cannot be decrypted by Descript ([https://www.descript.com/security](https://www.descript.com/security)). Data analysis will be supported by the online tool ATLAS.ti, for which the GDPR guidelines can be found here: [https://atlasti.com/legal/atlas-ti-web-white-paper-gdpr](https://atlasti.com/legal/atlas-ti-web-white-paper-gdpr).

All personally identifiable information will be pseudonymized, and all other personally identifiable data, such as your email address, will be held on network drives operated by the University of Cambridge with access restricted to members of the research team. Researchers’ computers accessing and storing personally identifiable data are password protected and have up to date operating systems and fully encrypted storage. While personally identifiable data (names, emails) will be kept separated from any sensitive information (background characteristics) and any research data (responses to the prompts) on the network drives, this information will be linked in the REDCap Safe Haven, to which only the researchers’ will have access.

All identifiable personal data and interview recordings will be destroyed 24 months after the end of the research project. Anonymous data will be kept, and uploaded to a public data repository, to allow other researchers to build on this work. We will anonymise by removing names and making personal characteristics more generic (such as ethnicity, discipline, career stage, locations etc) if there are less than three participants with these characteristics in our sample – e.g. school affiliation will be given rather than department.
General information about how the University uses personal data can be found here [https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data](https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data)

Are there possible disadvantages and/or risks to taking part?
You are in control of what you disclose in the Your Voice submissions. The nature of these submissions means you might disclose events or experiences that make you feel vulnerable, or which involve other people. Everything that you tell our researchers will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law; unless we judge that your personal safety is at risk in which case, we would alert Andrea Hudson (University Director of HR) or Head of House for Junior Research Fellows to suggest an appropriate course of action.

During analysis, the research team will remove all identifiable characteristics from your submissions, including names of people and events. We will also refer to you as a researcher in a broad discipline rather than narrowing down your research focus.

You do not have to take part in the research.

You can withdraw your participation any time up to 3 months after the end of the data collection when we expect to start disseminating our findings.

Are there possible benefits to taking part?
We hope there will be a wider benefit to researchers. We will work to use the findings to improve research culture via interventions that strive to reduce misalignment of professional expectations between researchers and their managers.

What will happen to the results of the research project?
We will work to ensure that the results of this study influence the University of Cambridge’s guidelines and policies around the professional relationship between PIs and postdocs.

Study findings will also be written up and published as academic papers and/or presented at conferences.

Who is organising the study?
The study is being organised by the Action Research for Research Culture project at the University of Cambridge. The project is funded by Research England, the Wellcome Trust and the University of Cambridge.

Who was responsible for the ethical review of the study?
The project has been reviewed by the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee.
Who should I contact for further information?
If you would like further information on the research project, please contact the research team by emailing arrcproject@admin.cam.ac.uk.

What do I do now?
If you are happy to participate in the study, please tick yes to the relevant questions on the online form.
Whatever you decide, we thank you for considering taking part and wish you the best of luck with your professional development at the University of Cambridge.

Resources to support you
We hope your engagement with the project has been interesting and thought-provoking; however, if it has reminded you of unacceptable behaviour by members of the University or you feel upset by anything that has been discussed you may find these resources helpful:

Dignity @ Work Policy https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/dignity-work-policy

Grievance and disciplinary matters https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/hr-staff/information-staff/staff-guide/terms-employment/grievances

Counselling for students: https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk

Counselling for staff: https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk

For more information on the University’s data protection policy see: https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/research-participant-data

References


Wellcome Trust. (2020). What researchers think about the culture they work in. https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture