

# ISTAART Professional Interest Area to Elevate Early Career Researchers and University College London survey turns a spotlight on early career researcher life and challenges

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## ASSOCIATION UPDATE

# ISTAART Professional Interest Area to Elevate Early Career Researchers and University College London survey turns a spotlight on early career researcher life and challenges

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The Alzheimer's Association International Society to Advance Alzheimer's Research and Treatment (ISTAART) Professional Interest Area to Elevate Early Career Researchers (PEERS) and University College London have published compelling, and sometimes worrisome, new survey results. The *Listening to Early Career Dementia Researchers* report<sup>1</sup> has unearthed both encouraging and cautionary new insights related to life as an early career dementia researcher.

The voluntary survey was completed by more than 500 early career researchers (ECRs) from 42 countries, with ECRs from the United Kingdom and United States providing 34% of responses. Respondents work across all fields of dementia research and discovery—from lab-based research to clinical research and care and qualitative research. Two-thirds of those completing the survey were women, and 22% consider themselves to hold an identity that is underrepresented at their institution.

The survey highlights that there is a strong ECR population who are passionate about their work and happy in the field. At the same time, many are considering leaving, and there are significant barriers to remaining within the field. They also highlight that ECRs work within a complex system in which there is a long-hours culture, pressure to publish and potentially move locations, and stiff competition for funding. Survey respondents say that funding is often insufficient, particularly where it creates bottlenecks for career progression.

Further analysis of the results is being conducted, and the ISTAART PEERS group is now working to provide support and work with partners to highlight the survey results. Goals are to deliver improvements, and attract and retain more ECRs who consider dementia their

chosen area of focus. However, it is clear from the results that researchers would like to see:

- Increased funding, particularly in areas in which there are career bottlenecks, for example, fellowships, postdoctoral positions, and positions in countries where dementia research is not prioritized.
- Improved job security and longer contracts.
- Changes to research culture with more training, and personal support and mentoring.
- Concerted efforts to address discrimination.

## 1 | KEY FINDINGS

### 1.1 | Job security and funding

Seventy-seven percent of researchers in the survey are happy in their current role, but 84% agree or strongly agree that “The short-term nature of research contracts and funding is a barrier to making advancements and discoveries in dementia research.” Only 25% believe dementia research is sufficiently funded.

The main barriers to career progression are seen as funding (74%), job availability and security (60%), and work-life balance (54%). When asked if they were thinking of leaving dementia research, 52% responded yes/maybe.

Funding systems are complicated, with 47% of researchers having two or more funders, and 8% having four or more. Forty-seven percent

of researchers do not believe they have sufficient resources to carry out their research projects, and 46% believe they do.

Forty-three percent of researchers have experienced mental health issues, affecting their effectiveness at work (74%), confidence (69%), and motivation (66%).

## 1.2 | Workplace

Discrimination is perceived as improving in some areas, particularly sexism (51%). However, for ageism, racism, religion/faith, homophobia, and ableism the majority are uncertain or feel the issues remain unchanged or have gotten worse.

Fifty percent of survey respondents who identify as an ethnic minority have experienced some form of racism. Sixty-four percent of those who are gay or lesbian have experienced some form of homophobia (5% of all survey respondents). For those who experience different forms of discrimination and/or abuse, most indicate that it affects their confidence at work, effectiveness, relationships, and ambition.

The inspiration to work in dementia research primarily comes from personal curiosity and an interest in the research process (81% and 83%, respectively), with only 43% inspired by a personal connection to dementia and 16% inspired by a teacher. However, among those who chose dementia research as a career, 70% agree or strongly agree that it is personally important for them to work in dementia research.

From the 40 researchers who responded and have left dementia research, the main reasons were being unable to find a new position/funding (34%) and needing more stability (25%). Many (71%) say they would return to the field, with most highlighting that improved funding and stability would be a key condition.

Most researchers responding to the survey have good relationships with their line managers/supervisors, with 61% reporting that their style suited them, and 39% saying they see them every week. However, 20% report only seeing their managers/supervisors every 2 months or even less.

## 1.3 | Publishing

Researchers feel pressure to publish (92%). However, they also report too little time to work on writing and/or publishing research findings (50%) and analyzing results (42%), and too much time spent on administrative tasks (46%). Almost 59% say they have no time for writing, and that it is getting harder to publish results (44%). Many survey respondents do not believe the current peer review system is effective (46%, with 21% being unsure, and 33% believing it is effective).

Researchers believe that reviewers should be blinded to article authors, paid for their time, and better trained. They also ask that journals reduce the time the process takes from submission to publication.

## 1.4 | Pandemic

Many researchers highlight that projects have been delayed because of the pandemic (78%) and as a result, many had to change and rethink projects (58%). Forty-two percent report that the pandemic has impacted their career progression; however, >70% of researchers believe their organizations have effectively supported them during these difficult times.

## 1.5 | Support

Given the issues of funding and job seeking, it will come as no surprise that grant and fellowship writing support is highlighted as the primary area where support is requested (58%), closely followed by building collaborations (57%). When asked how researchers want to receive support, one-to-one coaching and mentoring is most favored (39%).

## 2 | CONCLUSION

Funders, workplaces, governments, and leaders in the field should work to make it easier for such diverse, passionate, inspired drivers of discovery to remain and advance in the dementia research space.

### MORE INFORMATION

The report, further details, and the full data can be freely accessed at [www.dementiaresearcher.nihr.ac.uk/survey](http://www.dementiaresearcher.nihr.ac.uk/survey).

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

All authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

### REFERENCE

1. Smith A, Shaaban CE, Bartels SL, Brum WS, Welikovitch LA, Folarin RO. Listening to Early Career Researchers. University College London, ISTAART PIA to Elevate Early Career Researchers. Available at [www.dementiaresearcher.nihr.ac.uk/survey](http://www.dementiaresearcher.nihr.ac.uk/survey). Accessed April 19, 2022.

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