

Towards Healthy Working Environments for Early Career Researchers

As representatives of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in Europe, Eurodoc advocates to improve mental wellbeing among those and others in academia. While ECRs' working conditions vary greatly across Europe, it must be recognised that they are professionals, and as such, academia is their workplace.

WHO's definition of a healthy workplace states that

“A healthy workplace is a place where everyone works together to achieve an agreed vision for the health and well-being of workers and the surrounding community. It provides all members of the workforce with physical, psychological, social and organizational conditions that protect and promote health and safety. It enables managers and workers to increase control over their own health and to improve it, and to become more energetic, positive and contented.”

To achieve that academia lives up to this definition of a healthy workplace for all ECRs, we have identified the following 10 principles that must be met by the academic institutions and supported by national as well as European policymakers.

Principles of a healthy workplace for early career researchers

1. The academic culture needs to shift toward supporting a healthy work-life balance of ECRs. Such a culture supports the employment rights of ECRs, promotes networking and interaction opportunities, motivates ECRs to take vacations, and limits ECRs' working hours. In addition, it recognizes the highly international environment in which academia must adequately address cultural and language barriers.
2. ECRs should be employed such that they, at minimum, have social security benefits such as parental leave, sick-leave, health insurance, pension, and unemployment benefits.
3. ECRs must be informed about their rights and obligations. This should begin already in the recruiting process but continue onwards. They should receive information about where to seek help and who to consult.
4. The mental health of ECRs should receive attention, and it should be monitored regularly also by external professionals.
5. Mental health issues should be recognized and destigmatized. It includes a possibility for ECRs to obtain sick leave due to stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health related issues. ECR should be met with support when returning to work after sick-leave.
6. Academic institutions should have adequate support systems, such as an occupational health care provider or similar service, where ECRs can turn to mental health or other work environment-related issues. Academic institutions should ensure that ECRs receive adequate supervision and that they have the right to change supervisors if needed.

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7. Supervisors, Principal Investigators, and managers should receive adequate training about how to create a healthy work-life balance in a research environment, as well as how to support ECRs in navigating the support systems they have access to.
8. ECRs should receive counseling and support in their career development. This includes both career development towards an academic as well as a non-academic career. In addition, contributions besides their research work, such as - but not limited to - teaching and outreach, should be properly recognized.
9. The training of ECRs should support them in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Project management and mental health workshops should be integrated into doctoral training.
10. It is the academic institutions that are responsible for ensuring that all ECRs, supervisors, PIs, and managers alike have information about and access to the necessary support and training as specified above.

In Eurodoc, we are committed to advocating for academia to become a healthy work and study environment across Europe. Therefore we encourage ECRs to (pro-)actively promote and advocate for a healthy working research culture in academia and other academic research institutions and work-life balance among themselves, their peers, as well as the students they teach and supervise. The shifting of the academic culture from a competitive one towards a collaborative one is fundamental in the context of creating a sustainable work environment for ECRs, and thus, we recommend to all of academia to adopt the Open Science principles. Similarly, we advocate that ECRs actively use the training resources and preventive supportive services when available or strive for the creation thereof when needed.

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References

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