

# Transitioning from PhD to Career Researchers – Introducing the EMPOWER network

## Daniel J. Phipps

*University of Jyväskylä,  
Finland*

## Thomas Gültzow

*Open University of the  
Netherlands, The  
Netherlands*

## Sanne Raghoobar

*Wageningen University &  
Research, The Netherlands*

## Tuğçe Varol

*Maastricht University, The  
Netherlands*

Completing a PhD in health psychology and related disciplines is a monumental yet rewarding achievement, opening doors to diverse career opportunities in academia, industry, and government (Madan, 2024). But, for those who choose to remain in research, the journey is far from straightforward. Post-doctoral and early-to-mid-career researchers frequently encounter intense demands, with universities increasingly favouring temporary or short-term contracts over permanent, tenure-track positions (American Association of University Professors, 2022; Kimber, 2003). This trend has led to a highly competitive environment for securing long-term academic roles (Roy et al., 2024), with many researchers now spending longer than ever in early career and post-doctoral roles (Jadavji et al., 2016; Rahal et al., 2023; Van Benthem et al., 2020). Indeed, the average time as a post-doctoral researcher has been cited as high as 4-8 years (Van Benthem et al., 2020), although with notable variation between countries and scientific fields. As a result, it is commonplace for post-doctoral researchers and those in junior positions to find themselves in a precarious 'in-between' stage, feeling neither like students nor fully established researchers (Morris,

2021). This uncertainty about achieving a stable, long-term research career can be daunting. The combination of potentially high workloads, financial stress, and the fluid nature of early research careers has contributed to widespread reports of poor mental wellbeing, disillusionment, and confusion among post-PhD researchers (Share & Loxley, 2023; Van Benthem et al., 2020; van der Weijden & Teelken, 2023).

These findings may paint a concerning picture of the early post-PhD journey. Yet, most post-doctoral researchers and early career academics still report a deep enjoyment and passion for their work (Share & Loxley, 2023), and the vast majority remain committed to pursuing a research or academic career (van der Weijden et al., 2016). This combination of passion and vulnerability highlights the need to address the challenges faced by those embarking on research careers and raises an important question: how can we support these individuals in nurturing their passion and advancing their research while minimizing the negative impacts of early-career academic life?

In this regard, there are a myriad of factors research has shown to protect early-to-mid career researchers and academics mental health and encourage their best work. Unfortunately, however, many of these are out of reach for the average researcher, such as higher salaries, more job stability, and better recognition within institutions (Share & Loxley, 2023; Van Benthem et al., 2020; van der Weijden & Teelken, 2023). Addressing these issues requires a deeper cultural shift, as

recommended by researchers and interest groups worldwide (American Association of University Professors, 2022; Jadavji et al., 2016; Kimber, 2003; Van Benthem et al., 2020). However, in terms of immediate support, research has also shown that even simple steps can significantly nurture good quality work and foster happier, healthier researchers.

Overall, the simplest strategies for supporting early-to-mid career researchers revolve around two key themes: belonging and growth. That is, when researchers feel a sense of belonging within the research community (Morris, 2021; Share & Loxley, 2023), have opportunities to share their experiences with peers (Panayidou & Priest, 2021; Wisker et al., 2007), and receive support in their transition to senior research roles, they are more likely to thrive. It is here that we would like to introduce EMPOWER, which stands for the European network for post-doctoral early career and Mid-career researchers in health PsychOlogy focusing on Well-being and Empowerment of Researchers, the newest of the European Health Psychology Society's networks. The foundations of EMPOWER came to be at EHPS 2023 in Bremen, Germany, where a group of like-minded post-PhD researchers recognized that they shared similar experiences and challenges. They expressed a desire for a support group tailored to their needs. While the EHPS community already includes two networks, CREATE and Synergy, conversations with the committee members of these networks revealed a gap that EMPOWER aims to address—specifically focusing on the well-being and empowerment of post-doctoral early career and mid-career researchers in health psychology. On the final day of the EHPS 2023 conference, in a small café in Bremen, the idea for this new group was formed. Following discussions on goals and format, and after several meetings, the creation of EMPOWER was approved by the EHPS Executive Committee in early 2024 to launch in Cascais at the EHPS 2024 conference.

The overarching purpose of EMPOWER is to help

early-to-mid career health psychology researchers to achieve their best in research while also protecting their health and happiness as they develop through their career. Through EMPOWER, our mission is to provide a space where early-to-mid career researchers can meet, network, and share experiences, and where successful academics within EHPS can share their experiences and skills with up-and-coming researchers in an open, collaborative space. After launching at the EHPS 2024 conference, we will be working with early-to-mid career researchers in EHPS to share ideas and discuss the common needs of our community, before launching into a series of online and in-person events covering networking, skills development, and supporting each other. If you are interested in joining EMPOWER or finding out more, you can get all the relevant information at <https://ehps.net/about-empower/>.

## References

- American Association of University Professors. (2022). *2022 AAUP Tenure Survey*. American Association of University Professors. <https://www.aup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports>
- Jadavji, N., Adi, M., Corkery, T., Inoue, J., & Van Benthem, K. (2016). *The 2016 Canadian national postdoctoral survey report*. Available at: [www.Caps-Acsp.ca/Wp-Content/Uploads/2016/11/2016\\_CAPS-ACSP-National\\_Postdoc\\_Survey\\_Report.Pdf](http://www.Caps-Acsp.ca/Wp-Content/Uploads/2016/11/2016_CAPS-ACSP-National_Postdoc_Survey_Report.Pdf).
- Kimber, M. (2003). The Tenured “Core” and the Tenuous “Periphery”: The casualisation of academic work in Australian universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25(1), 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800305738>
- Madan, C. R. (2024). “What will you do after?”: Lessons from Academia and the World Beyond.

- Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 17470218241236144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218241236144>
- Morris, C. (2021). "Peering through the window looking in": Postgraduate experiences of non-belonging and belonging in relation to mental health and wellbeing. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(1), 131–144. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-07-2020-0055>
- Panayidou, F., & Priest, B. (2021). Enhancing postgraduate researcher wellbeing through support groups. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(1), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-06-2020-0038>
- Rahal, R.-M., Fiedler, S., Adetula, A., Berntsson, R. P.-A., Dirnagl, U., Feld, G. B., Fiebach, C. J., Himi, S. A., Horner, A. J., Lonsdorf, T. B., Schönbrodt, F., Silan, M. A. A., Wenzler, M., & Azevedo, F. (2023). Quality research needs good working conditions. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(2), 164–167. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01508-2>
- Roy, S., Velasco, B., & Edwards, M. A. (2024). Competition for engineering tenure-track faculty positions in the United States. *PNAS Nexus*, 3(5), pgae169. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae169>
- Share, M., & Loxley, A. (2023). Invisible and uncertain: Postdoctoral researcher careers in Irish universities. *Irish Educational Studies*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2222735>
- Van Benthem, K., Nadim Adi, M., Corkery, C. T., Inoue, J., & Jadavji, N. M. (2020). The changing postdoc and key predictors of satisfaction with professional training. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 11(1), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-06-2019-0055>
- van der Weijden, I., & Teelken, C. (2023). Precarious careers: Postdoctoral researchers and wellbeing at work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(10), 1595–1607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2253833>
- van der Weijden, I., Teelken, C., de Boer, M., & Drost, M. (2016). Career satisfaction of postdoctoral researchers in relation to their expectations for the future. *Higher Education*, 72(1), 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9936-0>
- Wisker, G., Robinson, G., & Shacham, M. (2007). Postgraduate research success: Communities of practice involving cohorts, guardian supervisors and online communities. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44(3), 301–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290701486720>



### Daniel J. Phipps

Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Australia

[djhipps@jyu.fi](mailto:djhipps@jyu.fi)



### Thomas Gültzow

Department of Theory, Methods & Statistics, Faculty of Psychology, Open University of the Netherlands, Heerlen, The Netherlands

[thomas.gultzow@ou.nl](mailto:thomas.gultzow@ou.nl)



### Sanne Raghoobar

Consumption and Healthy Lifestyles Group, Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands

[sanne.raghoobar@wur.nl](mailto:sanne.raghoobar@wur.nl)



**Tuğçe Varol**

Department of Health Promotion,  
Maastricht University

[t.varol@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:t.varol@maastrichtuniversity.nl)