Australian Academy of Science

emcrforum

Australian Perspectives of Early- and Mid-Career Researchers

2025 SURVEY REPORT

Acknowledgements

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian Academy of Science and EMCR Forum acknowledge and pay respects to the Traditional Owners of all the lands on which the Academy and EMCR Forum operate, and where their Fellows, employees and members live and work. The Academy and EMCR Forum recognise Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and honour their enduring connection to Country, from which we are committed to learn. We pay our respects to, and recognise the cultural authority of, their Elders past and present.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Key discoveries

334
RESPONDENTS

AT A GLANCE

80% WITHIN 10 YEARS POST-PHD

50% STEM, 37% HEALTH

55% ON FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS

27% RELOCATED TO AUSTRALIA FOR STUDY

EMERGING THEMES

A strong commitment to research careers

65% aim for university careers

21% undecided about future pathway

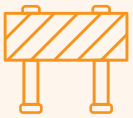
Academic careers remain the dominant aspiration

Precarity in employment conditions

55% on fixed-term contracts

Only 40% in continuing roles

Fixed-term roles most common in early career



Barriers to participation and funding

76% cite high competition

55% cite an emphasis on track record

44% report a lack of secure employment

33% cite difficulties joining grant teams

Mobility and career instability

54% moved institutions post-PhD

38% considering leaving academia due to funding or job insecurity

37% moved interstate

27% international cohort

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

58% SUPPORT BROADER RESEARCH IMPACT MEASURES

40% SUPPORT TWO-STAGE FUNDING PROCESSES

35% SUPPORT HIGH-RISK, HIGH-REWARD RESEARCH

39% SUPPORT BEING ABLE TO DRAW SALARIES FROM GRANTS

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a 2025 survey of 334 early- and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) working across Australian universities and research organisations. The survey was developed by members of the Executive Committee of the EMCR Forum at the Australian Academy of Science in order to capture the perspectives of the EMCR community on key aspects of the research system.

The survey explores EMCR experiences across a range of areas, including:

- access to research funding through the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council
- experiences with higher degree research supervision and peer review
- career progression and mobility.

Responses were collected anonymously to enable candid feedback on the challenges and conditions shaping this career stage.

Three key themes emerged from the survey:

- **Career uncertainty is widespread**. While many EMCRs remain committed to research and academic careers, this is often conditional on access to stable roles and clear progression pathways, with many reporting uncertainty about their long-term future.
- **Barriers to participation are consistent** across the cohort and are closely tied to the structure of research funding. High competition, emphasis on track record and insecure employment limit access to funding and constrain the ability of EMCRs to build independent research careers.
- **Mobility and attrition risks are increasing**. Frequent movement to secure roles is common and is accompanied by growing uncertainty about remaining in academia or Australia, raising concerns about workforce retention and future research capability.

Taken together, the findings suggest a misalignment between the aspirations and capabilities of EMCRs and the structural conditions in which they operate. They identify a set of persistent structural barriers that influence career progression and talent retention. Addressing these challenges will be important to strengthening career pathways and sustaining Australia's future research capacity.

This survey is the first in a planned series of annual consultations with the EMCR community. Over time, it will allow the Academy to track workforce trends and build an evidence base to inform ongoing policy engagement.

Context

Australia's research system depends on EMCRs to both deliver research outcomes, and as a critical pipeline for future scientific capability and leadership. However, EMCRs operate within a system characterised by short-term employment, highly competitive funding environments and limited progression pathways – conditions that shape both individual participation and renewal of the country's science workforce.

The findings of this survey reflect the broader structural challenges identified in both ***Australian science, Australia's future: Science 2035***[1] and ***Ambitious Australia: Strategic examination of research and development***.[2]

Australian science, Australia's future identifies significant gaps in future science capability – including workforce capacity and skills development – and highlights a misalignment between current system structures and projected national needs.

Similarly, ***Ambitious Australia*** identifies weaknesses in the research workforce pipeline, including declining domestic PhD enrolments, reliance on international students and limited mobility between academia and industry. It also points to the relatively small number of PhD-qualified researchers employed in industry, limiting the flow of skills across sectors.

Together, these reports emphasise the importance of more coordinated approaches to workforce development. This includes supporting diverse career pathways, strengthening links between sectors and enabling researchers to build skills at every career stage.

As the primary pipeline for future research capability, EMCRs provide an early indicator of how these systemic challenges are emerging in practice. The findings of this survey suggest that this misalignment is already being experienced at the individual level, particularly through career uncertainty, barriers to funding and limited progression pathways.

These insights underscore how structural features of the research system influence career participation and retention across the Australian EMCR cohort.

Participants at the 2025 WA EMCR Symposium.

1 Australian Academy of Science, Australian science, Australia's future: Science 2035, 2025, accessed 23 April 2026.

2 Strategic Examination of R&D independent panel, Ambitious Australia: Strategic examination of research and development final report, 2026, accessed 23 April 2026.

Emerging themes

Three key themes emerged from the survey findings, highlighting the interconnected challenges experienced by EMCRs:

- Widespread **career uncertainty**
- Consistent **barriers to participation**
- Increasing **mobility and attrition risks**

CAREER UNCERTAINTY

- Career uncertainty is a defining feature of the EMCR experience. A preference for academic careers exists alongside significant uncertainty about long-term job security. Among respondents, 65% wish to remain in academia, yet a substantial proportion are undecided about their future pathway, reflecting a system where career intentions are strong but confidence in achieving them is weaker.
- Employment conditions are a key source of uncertainty. Over half of respondents are on fixed-term contracts, compared to 40% in continuing roles. Fixed-term employment is particularly prevalent in the years immediately post-PhD. This leaves many in extended instability at a critical career stage, limiting long-term planning and reinforcing unclear or inaccessible progression pathways.
- The current funding environment further reinforces career uncertainty. Lack of funding and job security is the most commonly cited reason for considering leaving academia (38%). Respondents also report systemic barriers to funding, including high competition (76%), emphasis on publication track record (55%) and disadvantage for those without continuing positions (44%).
- These findings suggest that career uncertainty is a structural feature of the research system rather than a transitional phase. While EMCRs remain committed to academic careers, this commitment is often conditional on the availability of stable employment and clear progression pathways. Addressing this uncertainty will require systemic changes to employment and funding opportunities to provide greater stability.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

- Barriers to participation are widely reported across the EMCR cohort and are shaped by funding structures. A clear majority (76%) identify competitive schemes as a primary barrier, indicating demand exceeds available opportunities. More than half (55%) also point to the strong weighting on publication track record, which disadvantages those still establishing their research profile.
- Access to funding is shaped by structural and practical factors. Respondents report challenges being included on grant applications, with 33% noting difficulty collaborating with senior researchers. Time constraints are another key issue, with 27% indicating that teaching and other responsibilities limit their ability to prepare competitive applications. These pressures can reduce engagement with funding opportunities, particularly for those balancing multiple roles.
- Industry partnerships – offering an alternative funding source – are also inaccessible or challenging for some, due limited support from institutions. These constraints are not evenly distributed and may be more pronounced for researchers without established networks or institutional backing.
- Barriers to participation are not isolated issues, but are embedded within the broader funding environment. The cumulative effect of these constraints can limit opportunities for EMCRs to engage fully in the research system and to develop independent research programs.

MOBILITY AND ATTRITION RISKS

- Mobility is a prominent feature of EMCR career pathways, with 54% having moved institutions since their PhD and 37% relocating between states. Movement is concentrated in early career stages and reflects the need to access available roles and opportunities. Among those surveyed, 27% relocated to Australia for study, underscoring the contribution of international researchers to the workforce.
- The survey findings suggest that career mobility is frequently driven by necessity rather than choice. The prevalence of short-term roles and limited availability of ongoing positions means that many researchers must remain geographically flexible to continue working in the sector. This can create challenges for long-term planning and stability, particularly for those with personal or family commitments.
- The trends seen in the survey responses raise important considerations for workforce sustainability. High levels of mobility, combined with uncertainty about career continuity, may affect the retention of skilled researchers within Australia. Ensuring that career pathways are both accessible and stable will be critical to maintaining research capability and supporting the long-term development of the workforce.

To view and interact with the survey data used to inform this report, **please visit the data dashboard**

To learn more about the EMCR Forum, visit the **Academy website** or email **emcr@science.org.au**

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