

Publishers and Early-Career Researchers Working Together: Guiding Initiatives

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Abstract

This article summarizes the outcomes and outputs of a workshop at the 2024 Researcher to Reader Conference that explored the perspectives of both publishers and early-career researchers (ECRs) on existing ECR–publisher initiatives. The workshop identified several challenges of current initiatives, including those from technical, engagement, financial, and evaluation perspectives. A large part of the workshop was dedicated to cocreating possible solutions, and this article uses both the identified challenges and solutions to offer recommendations to guide current and future ECR–publisher initiatives.

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Introduction

Both commercial and nonprofit publishers increasingly recognize the significance of engaging with ECRs to attract new authors and reviewers, build loyalty, and gain fresh perspectives that can inform new policies from publishers. But what is in it for the ECRs? Working together with a publisher can boost the profiles of the ECRs involved and help them advance their careers, as well as help them to develop skills that are, or will be, important to them as academics. However, to ensure that ECR initiatives within the publishing industry are mutually beneficial, it is crucial to set the right goals; identify, anticipate, and address the main challenges; and learn from past initiatives—what did and did not work well.

A workshop held at the 2024 Researcher to Reader Conference in London (<https://r2rconf.com/>) explored various (current) ECR-championing and training initiatives (here referred to as ECR–publisher initiatives). For the purposes of the workshop, we defined ECRs as a group including postgraduate researchers through to researchers within 10 years of their PhD award date. Also, in the context of our discussions, “publishers” include commercial, nonprofit, and society publishers, as well as university presses. At this workshop, the participants—made up of approximately one-third ECRs, one-third publishers, and one-third consultants and technology providers—were encouraged to share their experiences, discuss issues and hurdles, come up with solutions, and formulate a list of recommendations for current and future initiatives. We note that all academic and publisher participants came from STEM fields; our discussion was therefore based on experience and examples from within this area, though we hope it is widely applicable.

ECR–Publisher Initiatives: What Already Exists and Why They Matter

To gain an overview of ECR–publisher interactions within the current publishing ecosystem, we described the key features

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of existing ECR–publisher initiatives and discussed some examples (Table 1). We subdivided the initiatives into 4 categories: schemes in which ECRs act as editors, reviewers, authors, or ambassadors. For clarity, “ambassador” is defined as an individual who promotes the publisher authentically, regularly, and for an extended period of time—but without necessarily engaging in editorial activities. We were aware that some initiatives cover multiple categories, or none, and we did not attempt to cover all relevant initiatives. Notably, there were few ambassador initiatives, perhaps reflecting the less tangible nature of such schemes, and/or a lower attractiveness for ECRs to assume this role (Table S1).

We then turned to very basic, yet crucial, questions: why should publishers engage with ECRs, and what is in it for the ECRs? We asked workshop participants to generate a list of reasons to get involved with these initiatives—first from the perspective of the publisher and then from the ECRs’ point of view.

Reasons to Be Involved in ECR–Publisher Initiatives

Publisher’s perspective:

- Increases the dialogue between publishers and ECRs to better connect with sectors of the research community that are otherwise less accessible.
- Provides a chance to hear about new techniques and tools that allow publishers to adapt to new trends and enhance their publishing processes.
- Broadens the outlook on research fields helping publishers to diversify the scope of content they publish.
- Builds loyalty with the aim of encouraging ECRs to submit to, or review for, the publisher’s journals in the long run.
- Demonstrates the values and mission of the publisher by showcasing, for example, commitment to advancing science and support for the next generation of scientists.
- Speeds up the peer review process by introducing particularly motivated reviewers to the reviewer pool.
- Enhances the overall publishing experience by obtaining feedback and insights that can, for example, improve existing workflows.

ECR’s perspective:

- Allows career advancement, including the opportunity to build professional networks and enhance their publication track record.
- Opens the “Black Box” that is publishing for many ECRs by providing insights into manuscript evaluation, peer review, and editorial decision-making, for example.

- Allows ECRs to help advance their research field(s) by encouraging the discussion and dissemination of innovative studies.
- Raises the profile of the involved ECRs through greater visibility within the academic community, which potentially establishes them as emerging experts in their field.
- Builds self-confidence usually derived from, for example, improved skills, knowledge, and decision-making abilities.
- Provides different perspectives on scholarly communication, peer review, and editorial practices, and broadens their understanding of the research ecosystem.

What was clear was that all workshop participants agreed that ECR–publisher initiatives are important for both ECRs and publishers. During the workshop, the reasons for setting up these initiatives were also ranked in order of perceived importance (Figure 1).

Addressing the Challenges in Setting Up and Running ECR–Publisher Initiatives

Despite the unanimous agreement among workshop participants regarding the value of ECR–publisher initiatives, there are numerous challenges associated with setting them up and running them successfully. We delved into these challenges across 4 domains: technical, engagement, financial, and evaluation—noting that these domains are often associated with each other.

Setting up an ECR–publisher initiative often involves the need to navigate various technical hurdles, particularly around optimizing the available technological infrastructure without incurring significant cost. In terms of engagement, we focused, in particular, on the challenge of ensuring inclusivity and diversity. It is crucial to consider potential barriers to accessibility and inclusivity, as well as effective outreach strategies when planning or running ECR–publisher initiatives. There are also the financial constraints that often hinder the establishment and sustainability of ECR–publisher initiatives, which may also have negative impacts on inclusivity and diversity. Some of the specific financial challenges include securing funding, managing budgets, and ensuring equitable resource allocation. Lastly, one needs to consider how to evaluate and measure the impact of an ECR–publisher initiative. This is especially important when trying to draw lessons for the future and requires robust evaluation methodologies. Possible challenges revolve around defining measurable outcomes, collecting relevant data, and interpreting results.

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Table 1. Types of early-career researcher (ECR)–publisher initiatives, their key features, and examples.

| Key Features | Specific Initiatives |
|---|--|
| ECRs as Editors | |
| Mentorship and training Structured mentorship from experienced editors Training provided on editorial processes and ethical standards Collaborative and inclusive editorial boards Editorial boards with both early-career and senior researchers Professional development and community building Supportive environment for ECRs Easy access to professional development resources | British Geriatrics Society: <i>Age & Aging</i> journal Editorial Fellowship ¹ Applied Microbiology International: Letters in Applied Microbiology Junior Editors ² FASEB: <i>The FASEB Journal</i> Early Career Researcher Editorial Board ³ |
| ECRs as Reviewers | |
| Peer review mentorship Senior reviewers team up with ECR reviewers; provide guidance and training on review processes, critical analysis, ethical standards Professional development Opportunities for skill development through workshops, feedback sessions Access to resources for improving skills in reviewing and writing Recognition and incentives Formal recognition of contributions through certificates, acknowledgments, publication credits | Microbiology Society: Microbial Genomics Early Career Microbiologists Board of Reviewers ⁴ Applied Microbiology International: Letters in Applied Microbiology Junior Reviewing Editors ⁵ IOPP Peer Review Excellence: Training and Certification ⁶ Co-review Policy ⁷ Nature Communications: Co-review mentoring initiative ⁸ |
| ECRs as Authors | |
| Expert guidance Advice and support from experienced authors and editors; feedback on drafts; guidance throughout publication process Supportive publication environment Workshops and resources on writing, research methodologies, publication standards Recognition and visibility Dedicated sections or special issues to encourage submissions from ECRs | The British Academy: Early-Career Researchers ⁹ Regional Studies Association: Early Career Membership ¹⁰ The Royal Society: ECR Resource Hub ¹¹ Liverpool University Press: Trailblazers: An Open Access Monograph and Book Initiative for ECRs ¹² |
| ECRs as Ambassadors | |
| Outreach and advocacy ECRs actively promote and support mission of the publisher Platform for ECRs to express their interests and needs within academic publishing landscape Networking and collaboration Connections between researchers, institutions, publisher are encouraged and strengthened Professional development and recognition Publisher provides opportunities for skill enhancement in communication, leadership, public relations Ambassadors formally recognized for their contributions through certificates, acknowledgments, career advancement opportunities | eLife: Community Ambassadors ¹³ The Company of Biologists: The Node Correspondents ¹⁴ preLights Ambassadors ¹⁵ FocalPlane Correspondents ¹⁶ Microbiology Society: Champions Scheme ¹⁷ |

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Figure 1. Poll ranking the importance of all discussed reasons why early-career researcher initiatives should be launched within the publishing ecosystem.

Workshop participants were asked to consider specific challenges for each one of the chosen domains: technical, engagement, financial, and evaluation. First, we pooled these together and asked workshop participants to rank them in order of perceived importance (Figure 2).

Following our exploration of the challenges associated with establishing ECR–publisher initiatives across the 4 domains, our workshop participants worked in groups (a mix of ECRs, publishers, and other participants) to actively seek and discuss solutions for these challenges. Table 2 shows all the different challenges identified, for each of the 4 domains, and also includes the solutions proposed for each specific issue raised by workshop participants.

Guidelines for Current and Future ECR–Publisher Initiatives

ECRs can play integral roles within the publishing ecosystem, in various capacities—editors, reviewers, authors, and ambassadors). When setting up ECR–publisher initiatives, it is crucial to consider the goals, potential pitfalls, and challenges, as well as the evaluation tools. Based on

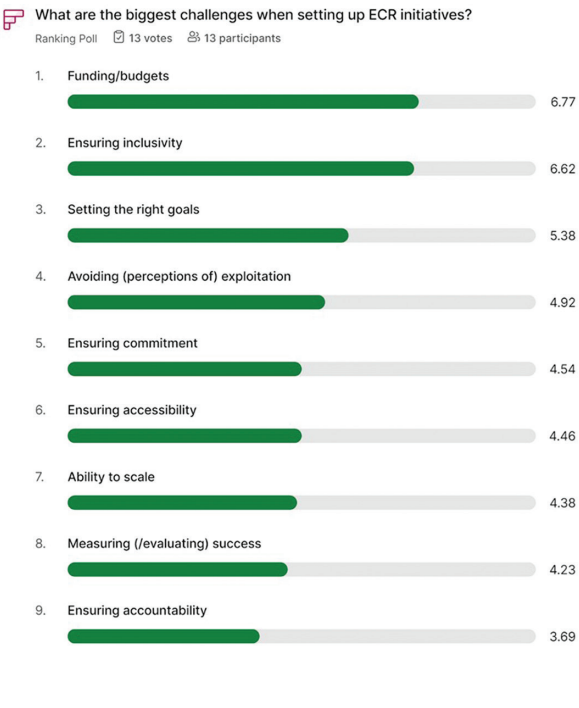


Figure 2. Poll ranking the importance of the main identified challenges when setting up an early-career researcher initiative within the publishing ecosystem.

discussions at the workshop, we have put together the following guidelines for current and future ECR–publisher initiatives.

Practical Guidelines

- 1. Planning.** Conduct thorough research to identify the type of ECR–publisher initiative that—in the given context—will most likely be beneficial for all parties involved. Set clear, measurable goals and priorities for the initiative.
- 2. Budgeting.** Factor in the costs of running an ECR–publisher initiative and critically review the budget. Ensure that expenses incurred by involved parties (e.g., ECRs, mentors) are funded.
- 3. Recruitment.** Recruit and train ECRs over a defined period of time, emphasizing skill development and networking. Ensure the recruitment process is inclusive, with open calls for applicants. Consider setting targets for the representation of different groups.
- 4. Implementation.** Ensure flexibility throughout the implementation process. Clearly define and communicate the nature of the work performed by all parties involved.

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Table 2. Early-career researcher (ECR)–publisher initiatives challenges and solutions proposed by workshop participants.

| Challenges | Solutions |
|---|--|
| Domain 1—Technical: What are the technical challenges involved in setting up an ECR initiative? | |
| Designing efficient and intuitive technological infrastructure (platform compatibility) | Conduct thorough user research to understand needs, preferences, and behaviors of your target audience Use cross-platform development frameworks Regularly update applications used to incorporate new platform features, enhancements |
| GDPR/Database management | Work with the system you have—do not reinvent the wheel Provide comprehensive training and awareness programs to educate users about GDPR regulations, data protection best practices, and their roles and responsibilities in ensuring compliance Foster a culture of data privacy and security awareness across organization to minimize risk of violations |
| Scale: ability to communicate with many people at the same time | Use tools for global communication (e.g., slack) Online forums Outdated tools may make a comeback (e.g., listserv) |
| Domain 2—Engagement: How to ensure engagement with as diverse a group of ECRs as possible? | |
| Setting clear priorities, objectives geared toward ensuring diversity; making sure you can retain flexibility to recognize and act on growth opportunities and growth areas (to avoid one-size-fits-all approach) | Gather and analyze quantitative/qualitative data to identify trends, patterns, emerging opportunities before, during, and at end of initiative Monitor key performance indicators and gather feedback to assess effectiveness of different initiatives; refine strategies accordingly Adopt an agile decision-making process that allows for flexibility, adaptation |
| Reaching new ECRs; helping involved ECRs remain connected to peers | Organize wide-spread open calls for applicants (e.g., through word of mouth, digital marketing, etc.) Use tools for global communication (e.g., slack, online forums, listserv, etc.) |
| Making engagement opportunities accessible | Explore different networks/platforms Meet ECRs where they are most active and most easily found |
| Working across time zones | Allow people to adjust work schedules to accommodate different time zones, which ensures overlap for collaboration and respects individual preferences/constraints |
| Working across language barriers | Use multilingual communication tools/platforms (e.g., translation software) to facilitate effective communication and collaboration among team members speaking different languages |
| Defining “diverse”: representation of different groups. Recognizing different cultures/groups | Organizational change comes first to ensure psychologically safe working environment Recruit new roles (e.g., sensitivity specialist, DEIA specialist, etc.) |
| Making the commitment to spending enough resources and time to ensure diversity | Factor in cost to make necessary changes in budget Recognize budgets are inherently political and a statement of intent: money allocated for things that matter |

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| Table 2. Early-career researcher (ECR)–publisher initiatives challenges and solutions proposed by workshop participants. (Continued) | |
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| Domain 3—Financial: What are the financial issues surrounding ECR initiatives? | |
| Publisher budgets are often stretched and funding for ECR initiatives may not be priority | There should be buy-in from senior leadership team of publishing company Society membership sometimes offers benefits that could be extended to others involved in the ECR–publisher initiatives (e.g., ECR discounts for membership) Research organizations, academic institutions/CDT, conference sponsors could fund and support ECR initiatives |
| Perception of exploitation of unpaid trainees/interns | Ensure equal treatment of everyone Ensure time spent as part of initiative is considered part of ECR’s working week; additional expenses incurred should be funded Provide meaningful recognition for ECR (e.g., certificates, acknowledgments, career advancement opportunities) Clearly define nature of work performed by ECRs: clear responsibilities and opportunities for visibility (no “behind-the-scenes” work) |
| Among ECRs, there may be no knowledge of where to obtain funding for “own” initiatives | Create mentorship networks connecting ECRs with experienced researchers/professionals who can provide guidance on funding opportunities, grant applications, and navigating research-funding landscape |
| Domain 4—Evaluation: How to evaluate the impact and success of an ECR initiative? | |
| Success metrics may not always be obvious | Measure what matters: avoid vanity metrics Decide on key objectives and metrics in advance |
| There is no framework for evaluation nor are there pre-designed evaluation criteria; where to obtain hard metrics when so many initiatives are about “soft” skills development | Evaluation depends on objectives; measure how many ECRs engage and are retained Develop measures for “soft” skills (e.g., confidence) Keep it simple: keep scale of project in mind; start small, though eventually you may want to scale up |
| Lack of uniform CPD programs | Collaborate with other publishers to develop industry-wide standards for CPD programs, ensuring consistency/quality |
| Measuring success depends on perspective/point of view | Both sides (publishers and ECRs) should be considered when evaluating what success looks like |
| Evaluating the success of a global initiative when participants are each in different settings with varying access to resources | Evaluation should focus on key performance indicators—priorities set at the start should be clear |
| Measuring “return on investment” | There is need to use a wide range of measures, which are all closely tied to goals |
| What happens after the initiative, or ECR involvement, ends? | Continue relationship with ECRs (e.g., as reviewers, editors); this will show that the initiative supported career progression Implement feedback mechanisms to assess skills learned and improve mentorship |

Abbreviations: CPD, continued professional development.

5. **Execution.** Organize relevant local, in-person, events, as well as inclusive online events across different time zones. Encourage peer-led initiatives and provide incentives. Put emphasis on strong marketing tools to effectively achieve the goals of the initiative. Use storytelling techniques. Monitor key performance

indicators and gather feedback to assess the effectiveness of different initiatives and refine your strategies accordingly.
6. **Recognition.** Recognize, certify, and publicly acknowledge the valuable contributions of ECRs, thereby promoting their professional development and

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standing within the scholarly community. Ensure time spent as part of the initiative is considered part of the ECR's working week.

7. **Evaluation and Follow-Up.** Support ECRs after involvement, offering certificates, references, or career opportunities. Ask all involved parties to evaluate their experience.

Conclusion

The workshop discussions at the 2024 Researcher to Reader Conference shed light on the importance of empowering ECRs within the publishing ecosystem. However, establishing and running effective ECR–publisher initiatives pose numerous challenges. Our workshop discussions make it clear, however, that there are promising solutions for most of these issues. If done right, the collaboration between publishers and ECRs can (continue to) drive positive change and innovation within the publishing ecosystem.^{18,19} Working with ECRs, publishers, and other stakeholders, we have developed a set of key recommendations for current and future initiatives.

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