



Strengthening the UK Higher Education Research Workforce: Evidence and Recommendations from CEDARS 2025

POLICY BRIEF

CEDARS is the Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey, run by Vitae to gather workforce experiences across UK higher education institutions. CEDARS 2025 gathered responses from 13,334 staff and research students across 53 UK institutions (Fig. 1).

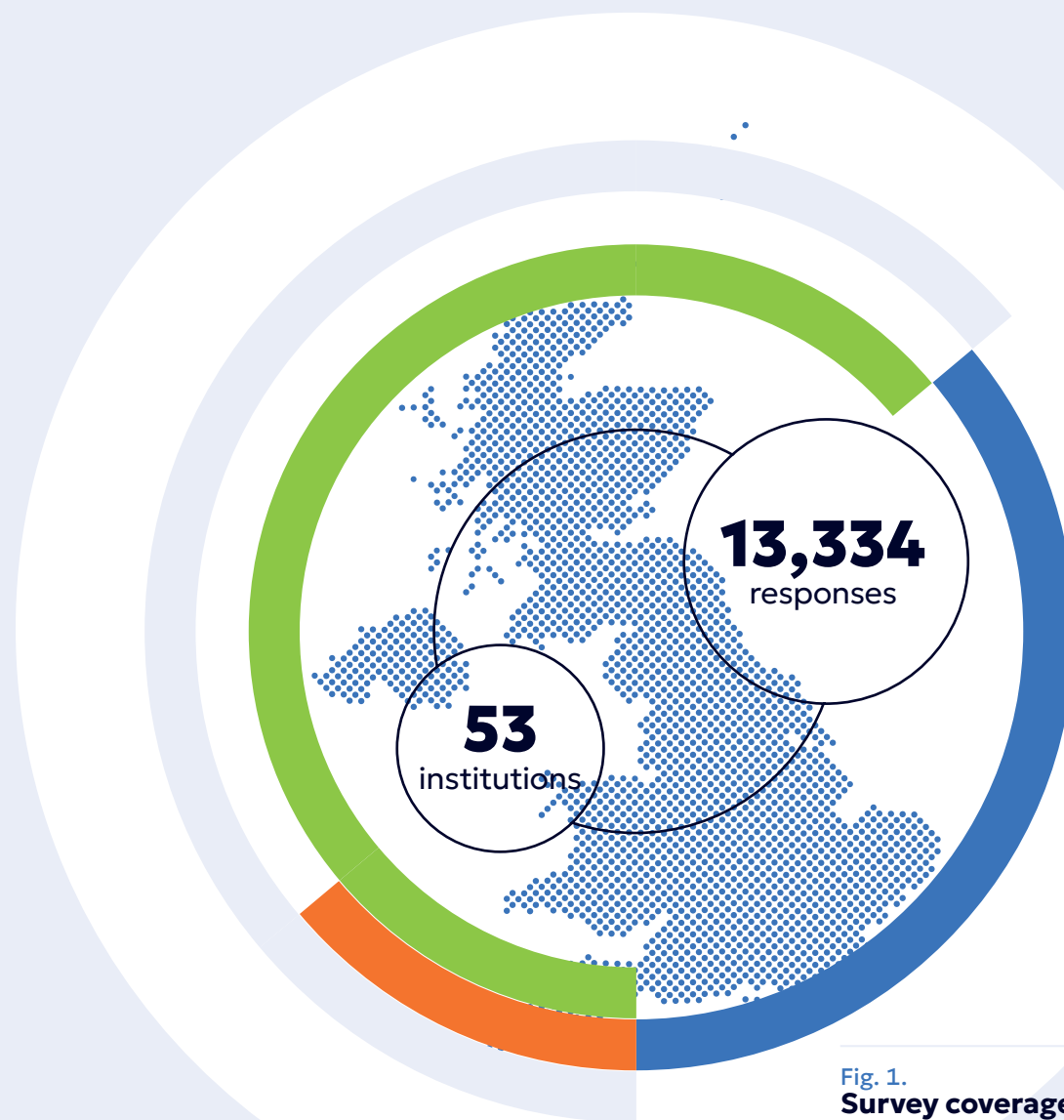


Fig. 1.
Survey coverage

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper emphasises that higher education reform should support institutional sustainability and avoid increased precarity for researchers. CEDARS 2025 provides evidence on the current state of the research workforce as institutions navigate this transition.

UK higher education institutions face constrained resources and uncertain funding. In this context, workforce sustainability depends on supporting existing staff effectively across all career stages. CEDARS 2025 reveals that institutions are struggling with this fundamental task.

Mid-career researchers report the lowest job satisfaction (65%) and poorest mental health support (44%) despite having the highest appraisal/development review participation (90%). Managers feel confident recruiting staff (94%) but lack confidence guiding staff through redeployment (47%). Professional development time remains limited, with 43% spending only 1-4 days annually and 24% spending less than one day.

These patterns indicate that institutions lack the workforce planning infrastructure needed for sustainability. Supporting the existing workforce requires coherent progression pathways, manager capability for career transitions, and protected development time.

KEY FINDINGS

Mid-career researchers receive inadequate support

Job satisfaction among academic staff follows a U-shaped pattern. Mid-career staff report satisfaction at 65%, compared to 73% for early career and 79% for senior staff (Fig. 2). This pattern extends to questions about mental health and wellbeing, where mid-career staff show the lowest agreement (44%) that their working environment supports their mental health and wellbeing, compared to early career (60%) and senior staff (54%) (Fig. 3). This mid-career dip occurs despite these staff members having the highest participation in formal appraisal/development review processes (90%) and low rates of precarity (85% of mid-career respondents having a permanent contract).

The CEDARS data point to a consistent dip in satisfaction and wellbeing among mid-career staff, even though they are more likely to have secure roles and to engage in formal appraisal and development review processes. This suggests that existing mechanisms for support and progression may not be meeting their needs. Understanding the specific needs of staff at this stage is essential. Targeted development, visible leadership pathways, and recognition of research contribution are key to improving satisfaction and wellbeing and essential to sustaining research and teaching capacity. Recognising mid-career researchers as a distinct-group and ensuring their needs are reflected in institutional and sector priorities, will help strengthen the research workforce.

Fig. 2.
Job satisfaction by career stage

Follows a U-shaped pattern with mid-career academic staff reporting the lowest satisfaction



Fig. 3.
Mental health support by career stage

Mid-career academic staff agree least that their working environment supports their mental health and wellbeing

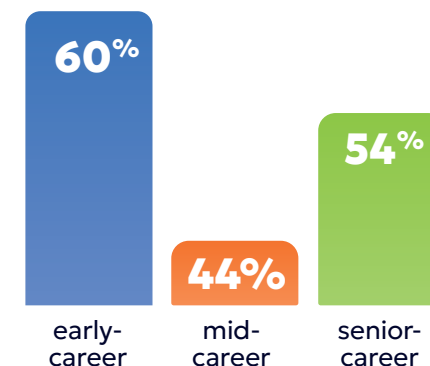
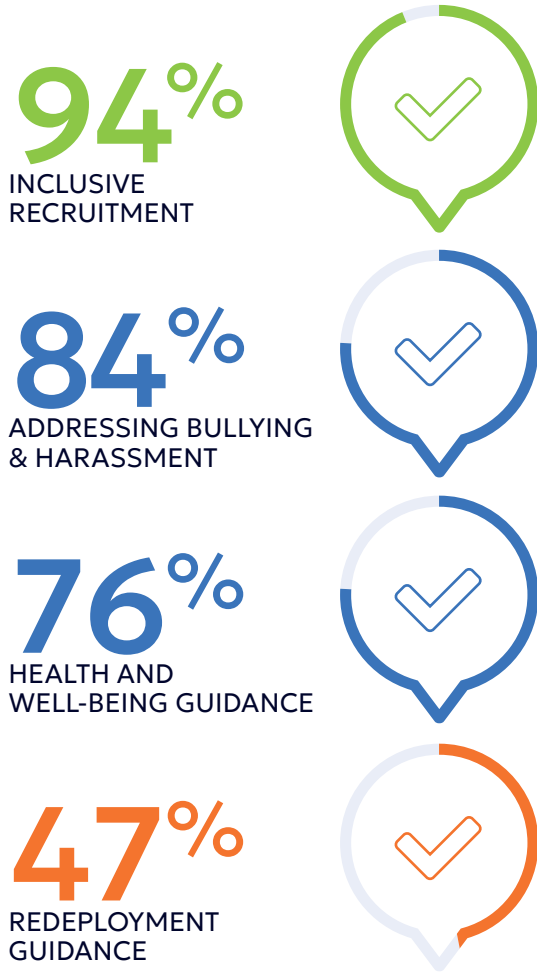


Fig. 4.

Manager confidence contrasts

While most feel confident in using inclusive recruitment processes and supporting staff career aspirations, gaps emerge in other areas

**Management capability is unevenly developed**

Among staff with management responsibilities, confidence levels vary significantly by task. 94% feel confident using inclusive recruitment processes and 93% supporting career aspirations. However, only 47% feel confident providing guidance on institutional redeployment processes and 76% feel confident responding to issues relating to bullying and harassment (Fig. 4).

Evidence indicates that many institutions lack the capacity to support staff through career transitions and to respond effectively to workplace culture concerns, including bullying and harassment. This gap has become more pressing in the current economic climate, as uncertainty around roles and funding increases. Institutions must improve the support for managers and the tools they use to guide colleagues through tough situations. Supporting staff at risk for redundancy or facing workplace culture concerns can be extremely challenging and managers cannot act without clear and reliable tools to use. Institutions should ensure that support frameworks are practical, accessible, up-to-date and provide meaningful help that enables managers to respond with confidence and compassion when these issues arise.

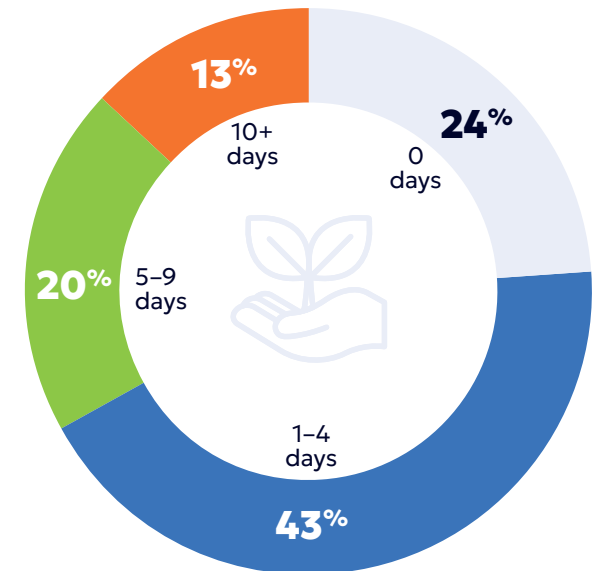
Professional development engagement remains low

43% of respondents spent 1-4 days on training and professional development in the past year. 24% spent less than one day or no time (Fig. 5). Unmet demand exists in leadership training, where 46% want training but only 39% have completed it. Research-only staff show larger gaps, with 57% wanting leadership training and only 29% having completed it.

Fig. 5.

Time spent on CPD

Time spent on training and continuing professional development is low



The data indicate a disconnect between institutional provision and staff engagement in professional development. Some staff may face barriers to accessing training, such as limited time, workload pressures, or lack of awareness of available opportunities. Others may not recognise informal activities, such as mentoring or collaboration, as valuable forms of professional growth. There is also clear unmet demand for further opportunities, particularly in leadership training.

Employment security concerns extend beyond contract type

While 94% of research and teaching staff hold permanent contracts, only 46% agree their future is secure (Fig. 6). This suggests concerns about institutional stability extend beyond individual contract status. Research-only staff face acute insecurity. 64% are on fixed-term contracts and 13% on funding-limited contracts. Among all academic staff on time-limited contracts, 26% have contracts of 12 months or less. 63% of research-only staff disagree they feel secure about their future.

The findings show that job insecurity affects not only research-only staff but also those in permanent roles. Qualitative responses across contract types highlight that financial pressures, restructuring, and sector-wide uncertainty contribute to this sense of insecurity. Addressing this requires coordinated sector and institutional action, with targeted measures to support those most at risk of funding uncertainty. Institutions can strengthen confidence by increasing transparency around funding and workforce planning, improving communication, and ensuring career development and redeployment support for staff.



Fig. 6.
Employment security concerns



94%

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*however
only*

46%

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future is
secure



Career progression clarity varies by role type

Research and teaching staff are most likely to agree that promotion pathways are clear (63%). Research-only staff show lower agreement (45%), as do innovation/enterprise staff (36%) and technical staff (36%). Among research-only staff, 75% aspire to academic roles but only 65% expect to achieve this goal, indicating a 10 percentage point gap between aspiration and expectation (Fig. 7).

The small reported gap between aspiration and expectation masks a deeper problem. While many staff express ambition to advance, fewer feel confident that opportunities are available or attainable. This lack of clarity can affect perceptions of long-term career prospects and the value placed on different roles. In the current funding climate, institutions need to strengthen the visibility and accessibility of development and progression pathways to build confidence and support retention of staff across all staff groups.

Experiences vary systematically by demographic group

While 73% agree their institution is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion, experiences differ significantly. 16% of all respondents report witnessing or being subject to discrimination incidents in the last two years. Women report discrimination at higher rates (18%) than men (12%). Ethnic minority groups report substantially higher rates (22-31%) than white staff (13%).

Staff with health-related barriers report markedly different experiences. Among academic staff with any level of health barriers, 60% agree their institution is committed to EDI compared to 77% without barriers. Those experiencing substantial barriers report discrimination at much higher rates (42%) than those with no barriers (13%) (Fig. 8). These staff also report lower job satisfaction (60% vs 76%) and reduced feelings of inclusion (62% vs 77%).

The results show that many staff do not experience their institution’s commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in the same way. Health-related barriers in particular make these gaps wider, affecting staff confidence, satisfaction and sense of belonging. Creating truly inclusive workplaces means ensuring that institutional commitments to EDI are reflected in everyday practice. This includes how support is provided and how success is recognised, so that all staff feel included and supported in their work.

Fig. 8.
Discrimination and health barriers
Academic staff experiencing substantial health-related barriers report higher discrimination

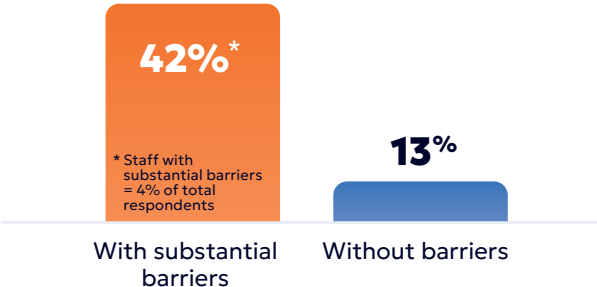
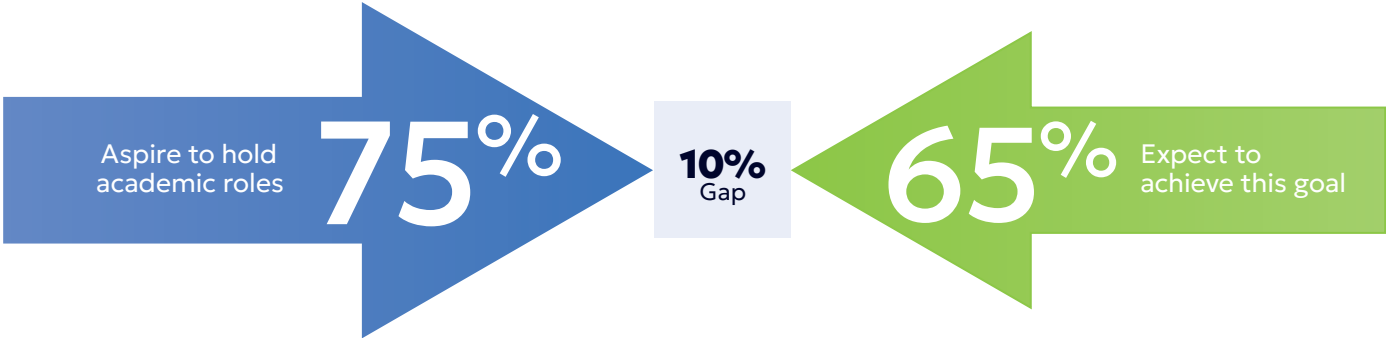


Fig. 7.
Aspirations vs expectations of holding an academic role



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

- **Understand your workforce systematically:** Institutions cannot support staff effectively without understanding these patterns within their own workforce. Institutions need clear evidence about who their staff are, what support they receive, and where experiences diverge.
- **Build management capability for the staff you have:** In constrained environments, institutions need managers who can support staff through role changes, career transitions, and development within existing structures. This requires investment in management development and institutional processes.
- **Provide clear progression routes for all staff types:** Without clear routes forward, institutions lose capability they have already developed. Staff also need to understand how to progress within their current roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Recent policy has focused on research cost recovery, infrastructure investment, and skills training. CEDARS 2025 evidence shows that without parallel attention to workforce sustainability, these ambitions risk foundering. The following recommendations address this gap:

- **Embed people considerations in policy implementation:** The Modern Industrial Strategy and higher education reform depend on skilled researchers, technicians, and teams. Implementation should include explicit attention to career pathways, progression, and workplace culture alongside skills training and infrastructure investment.
- **Strengthen Concordat governance and accountability:** The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers provides infrastructure for workforce sustainability, but CEDARS evidence shows significant implementation gaps. Funders who steer the Concordat should consider how to make implementation more consequential.
- **Consider how funding models affect workforce stability:** Funders should work with government to examine how funding volatility and grant conditions affect workforce planning and what coordinated action could address systemic instability.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full CEDARS 2025 aggregate report is available for Vitae members. Participating institutions can access their specific benchmarking data and analysis tools through the Jisc platform.

Contact us about running CEDARS at your institution: Visit www.vitae.ac.uk/cedars or contact cedars@vitae.ac.uk

