

Redefining sabbaticals: A strategic investment in early career researchers' futures

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Opening: A call to rethink academic development

In the dynamic and demanding world of higher education, the traditional concept of a sabbatical – a paid leave granted to faculty for study or travel – has often been viewed as a privilege afforded primarily to established academics (Sima, 2000; Yarmohammadian et al., 2018). This longstanding model typically envisions sabbaticals as periods of rejuvenation and renewal for senior faculty, allowing them to step back from their teaching and administrative duties to engage deeply with research, travel, or other scholarly activities. The primary goal of these sabbaticals has been to reinvigorate seasoned scholars, giving them the time and space to innovate, reflect, and recharge their intellectual energies.

Traditionally, sabbaticals have been justified as essential for sustaining long-term academic productivity and maintaining high scholarly engagement. They offer an opportunity for professors to explore new research areas, develop collaborative networks, and produce significant scholarly outputs such as books, articles, or grant proposals. This model implicitly assumes that the most significant contributions to academia come from those already well-established in their fields – those who need a break after years of continuous service to rediscover their passion for research and teaching (Gardner, 2022).

However, as the landscape of academia continues to evolve, we must reconsider who can benefit most from sabbaticals and how these opportunities can be structured to support a broader range of academics. The pressures of academia today – heightened competition for funding, increasing publication demands, and the relentless pace of technological change – affect not only senior faculty but also those at the beginning of their careers. Early career researchers (ECRs) are particularly vulnerable to these pressures (Bielczyk et al., 2020; Maclean, 2016). They are tasked with

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establishing their research identities, building professional networks, and securing tenure-track or permanent positions while navigating the intricacies of teaching and service requirements.

This opinion piece aims to spark a discussion on the role of sabbaticals in supporting early career researchers and to encourage institutions to adopt more inclusive and supportive sabbatical policies. It blends research evidence with a call to action, urging educational leaders to recognize the value of investing in the future of their academic staff.

The unique challenges facing early career researchers

Early career researchers (ECRs) often find themselves at a critical juncture in their professional lives, navigating a phase that is both exhilarating and precarious. This period, typically the first 5 years post-PhD (Bosanquet et al., 2017), is characterized by the dual imperatives of establishing a distinct research identity and securing stable academic positions. For many, these years are pivotal for building a publication record, which serves as the primary currency in academia, and for developing a professional network to support their future endeavours.

However, the pressures associated with this phase are considerable and multifaceted. The expectation to produce high-quality publications at a rapid pace can lead to significant stress and anxiety. ECRs often face the ‘publish or perish’ culture, where their future in academia hinges on their ability to secure prestigious publications (Kendal et al., 2022; Receveur et al., 2024). This pressure can stifle creativity, as researchers may feel compelled to prioritize projects more likely to be published over those that are innovative or exploratory but potentially riskier. Consequently, the constant demand for productivity can result in a narrow focus on short-term gains at the expense of long-term intellectual development.

In addition to research and publishing, ECRs are frequently burdened with administrative duties and teaching responsibilities. While necessary for professional development, these roles can be overwhelming when combined with research demands (Salihu Shinkafi, 2020; Signoret et al., 2019). Administrative tasks and teaching often require significant time and effort, leaving little room for research activities. This can be particularly challenging for ECRs, who are still refining their teaching methodologies and learning to navigate the administrative landscape of their institutions.

Another significant challenge is the need for networking and collaboration. Building a professional network is crucial for gaining recognition in the academic community, accessing collaborative opportunities, and securing funding (Martin et al., 2023; Orlando and Gard, 2014). However, ECRs may find it difficult to network effectively, especially if they are not yet well-known in their field. Limited access to funding and resources further exacerbates these challenges, as many ECRs struggle to secure the grants necessary to support their research.

The cumulative effect of these pressures can lead to burnout, a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Tsybuliak et al., 2023). Burnout is particularly concerning among ECRs, as it can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and career trajectories. The high stress levels associated with balancing research, teaching, and administrative duties can diminish the quality of work and personal well-being, making it difficult to sustain a long-term academic career. Bartlett et al. (2021) found that sabbaticals are associated with significant reductions in symptoms of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Furthermore, the competitive nature of academia can lead to feelings of isolation and self-doubt among ECRs. Constantly proving oneself can be daunting, particularly in environments lacking mentorship and support. ECRs may also face unique challenges related to job security, as many hold

temporary or precarious positions. This lack of stability can make it challenging to plan for the future and can contribute to financial and personal stress.

In light of these challenges, it is imperative to reconsider the traditional models of support and development for ECRs (Lee, 2024; Merga and Mason, 2021). Sabbaticals, often reserved for senior faculty, could be valuable for ECRs, providing them the time and space to focus on research, develop new skills, and build professional networks. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges ECRs face, academic institutions can foster a more supportive and sustainable environment for emerging scholars. This benefits the individuals and contributes to the overall vitality and innovation of the academic community.

Addressing potential barriers and concerns

Despite the well-documented benefits of sabbaticals (Davidson et al., 2010; Ioppolo and Wooding, 2023; Leung et al., 2020), ECRs often encounter significant barriers when attempting to take advantage of these opportunities. Funding constraints are a primary concern, as many institutions lack the financial resources to support sabbaticals for all faculty members, let alone those at the beginning of their careers. Unlike senior academics, who may have established funding streams or endowments to cover their sabbatical periods, ECRs often struggle to secure the necessary financial backing. This disparity highlights a critical gap in support structures, as the financial viability of taking a sabbatical can be a deciding factor for many ECRs.

Institutional support is another significant barrier. The policies and practices surrounding sabbaticals are often tailored to the needs and schedules of more established faculty. While senior researchers can more readily access these opportunities through formalized policies or informal support networks, ECRs frequently find these doors closed. The lack of clear, consistent policies for ECRs exacerbates this issue, leaving many young researchers uncertain about their eligibility for sabbaticals or the potential impact on their career progression.

Moreover, a pervasive concern is that taking time off during the critical early career phase could be perceived negatively. ECRs may worry that a sabbatical might be seen as a lack of commitment or an inability to cope with the demands of academia. This perception is particularly problematic in a competitive academic environment, where visibility and continuous output are often seen as indicators of success. The fear of missing out on career-defining opportunities, such as publishing pivotal papers or securing crucial grants, can deter ECRs from considering sabbaticals as a viable option.

To address these concerns, institutions must develop and implement clear, supportive policies that explicitly recognize sabbaticals as a vital component of career development for ECRs. Such policies should include financial support mechanisms, such as grants or fellowships specifically earmarked for ECR sabbaticals, and clear guidelines that outline the benefits of taking a sabbatical. Institutions should also ensure that taking a sabbatical will not negatively impact tenure or promotion prospects, encouraging ECRs to take advantage of these opportunities without fear of professional repercussions.

A call to action: Rethinking institutional policies

To fully leverage the potential of sabbaticals for ECRs, universities, funding bodies, and educational policymakers must adopt a comprehensive and nuanced approach. This rethinking should encompass redefining sabbaticals beyond the traditional long-term leave, promoting diverse formats such as short-term residencies, retreats, and peer-to-peer collaborations outside the typical academic

settings. Below are specific recommendations across three levels: government policies, institutional programs, and departmental practices.

Government policies: Advocating for national support

Governments play a crucial role in setting the tone and providing the necessary support for academic development. To support ECRs in taking sabbaticals, national policies should:

- **Expand funding opportunities:** Establish dedicated funds or grant programs that specifically cater to the sabbatical needs of ECRs. This could include short-term grants for international travel, collaborative projects, or specialized training programs that allow ECRs to gain new skills and insights.
- **Promote inclusive definitions:** Broaden the definition of sabbaticals in policy frameworks to include short-term, intensive research stays, professional development retreats, and other forms of academic leave that can benefit ECRs. These flexible sabbaticals can help ECRs access valuable experiences without the need for extended time away from their primary positions.
- **Encourage work–life balance initiatives:** Government policies should encourage institutions to promote work–life balance, emphasizing the importance of sabbaticals for research productivity mental health and well-being. This can be achieved by incorporating sabbatical opportunities into broader academic welfare programs.

Institutional programs: Role of university management

University administrators and educational managers must recognize the critical role sabbaticals play in nurturing young academics. Institutions should:

- **Develop clear guidelines and policies:** Universities must create transparent policies detailing the eligibility criteria, application process, and support available for ECR sabbaticals. This includes offering mentorship and administrative assistance to help ECRs navigate the application process.
- **Introduce diverse sabbatical formats:** Institutions should offer various sabbatical options, such as short-term residencies, international exchanges, and peer-led retreats. For example, short-term sabbaticals could involve 3- to 6-month residencies at partner institutions, allowing ECRs to immerse themselves in different research cultures and methodologies.
- **Facilitate networking and collaboration:** Universities should provide platforms and resources for ECRs to connect with international networks and research communities. This can include partnerships with international organizations, funding for conference participation, and support for collaborative research projects.
- **Supportive infrastructure:** Establish offices or units dedicated to supporting sabbatical planning and execution, ensuring that ECRs receive comprehensive support, from securing funding to managing logistics and integrating back into their academic roles post-sabbatical.

Departmental practices: Engaging mentors and leaders

At the departmental level, faculty and lab leaders can directly influence the success and accessibility of sabbaticals for ECRs. Key practices include the following:

- **Active mentorship:** Mentors should actively encourage ECRs to consider sabbaticals as part of their career development. This includes helping them identify suitable opportunities, preparing applications, and planning for sabbatical periods without disrupting their research progress or teaching commitments.
- **Flexible arrangements:** Departments should explore flexible arrangements that allow ECRs to participate in sabbatical activities. Offering reduced teaching loads or temporary redistribution of administrative duties can facilitate short-term sabbatical participation.
- **Recognition and reward systems:** Departments should recognize and reward the outcomes of sabbaticals, such as publications, new collaborations, or innovative projects. Acknowledging these achievements can help normalize the practice and highlight its value within the academic community.

By implementing these recommendations, institutions can create a more supportive and enriching environment for ECRs. This benefits the individual researchers by enhancing their skills, networks, and well-being and contributes to a more dynamic, innovative, and resilient academic ecosystem. Encouraging a sabbatical culture at all levels ensures that the academic workforce is well-prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Conclusion: Building a sustainable academic future

As we reflect on the role of sabbaticals, it becomes clear that they are more than just a break from routine – they are essential for fostering innovation, well-being, and professional growth. For ECRs, in particular, sabbaticals offer a unique opportunity to accelerate their career development, reduce burnout, and engage deeply with their research. By making sabbaticals more accessible and supported, we can create a more equitable and thriving academic community.

Thus, we advocate for a paradigm shift in conceptualizing and implementing sabbaticals. Rather than being a period of respite mainly for the experienced, sabbaticals should be seen as a vital component of academic career development at all stages. This reimagined model would support the immediate needs of ECRs and lay the foundation for a more innovative, dynamic, and sustainable academic environment.

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