Report on best practices on early researcher development

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the [EU definition](#), this report considers an Early-Stage Researcher (ESR) to be either:

(a) PhD candidates

(b) Postdoctoral researchers (up to approx. 4 years after obtaining their PhD)

Every early-stage researcher is different. There is no uniform approach to supporting the ESRs development that works across all disciplines, universities, institutes, etc.

Nevertheless, this report presents general best practices for supporting the development of ESRs. These practices have been identified through a number of interviews with representatives of various partners of the ScreenME-Net consortium. The main aim of the report is to share these best practices among the consortium members.

2. ESR NEEDS

An ESR has many needs including (but not limited to):

• Strong and sustained motivation (especially intrinsic motivation)
• Financial security
• Academic freedom
• Career preparation (for both inside and outside academia)

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- Close connection to and networking within the institute/department
- International networking
- Teaching experience
- Guidance and mentoring

Supporting ESRs so that their needs are met and their development continues is the shared responsibility of supervisors, faculties, and universities.

3. AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT FOR ESRS

3.1. DEFINING THE RESEARCH TOPIC

Ideally, ESRs should find the area of their research topics themselves. Finding a research topic themselves might be slower and more difficult than giving it to the ESR directly. But it seems better in the long-term because the ESR will more likely develop a strong intrinsic motivation. Allowing ESRs the freedom to choose and work on their own topic enables them to grasp the topic and find their own interest.

When defining a research topic, the risks include:

- The PhD or post-doctoral topic is not a good fit for ESR.
- If part of a larger project, the ESR changes the topic so that it no longer falls within the project's purview.
- Supervisor is unsuitable for the self-selected topic.

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Ways of mitigating these risks include:

• Giving the ESR the freedom to define and find, then guide and shape, the topic.

• Early contact and communication with the supervisor before submission of the ESR's research application.

• Appointing more than one supervisor for balanced perspectives.

• Mutual expectation management: the supervisor(s) can establish and communicate what they expect from the supervision and supervisee. Likewise, the supervisee can establish and communicate what they expect from the supervision and the supervisor.

• If a PhD is part of a research project, then it is ideal if the supervisor is not the Principle Investigator (otherwise, if the ESR wants to leave the project, they will also leave the supervisor – and vice versa).

If the ESR is not able to choose their topic, it is crucial that both the supervisor and the faculty/research centre, allow for flexibility. ESR need to be able to adapt, and update, their topic depending on their own interest and skills, and to external influence. For example, the COVID crisis has had drastic impact on several PhDs, requiring them to adapt their methodology (like adapting ethnographic observations).

1.2. ENABLING GOOD ESR WORK AND LEARNING

Creating an ideal environment and the conditions conducive to an ESR's work and learning requires that the ESR is financially secured and supported, ideally from the faculty/institute. Furthermore, it takes appropriate measures to avoid overloading the ESR. This must also be balanced by providing opportunities for the ESR to gain experience in other areas of academic life.

Risks here include:

• Overloading the ESR with work not related to PhD or post-doctoral research.

• Also (the opposite); not including the ESR into the other academic work (teaching, funding, administration) resulting in the ESR lacking experience that will increase chances for future employment.

• The ESR lacks resources for travel to conferences and empirical work.

• Co-supervisors not communicating with one another or having contradictory ideas/approaches to the research.

• Exploitation by supervisor(s) for their own research project to the detriment of the ESR's work.

Ways of mitigating risks include:

• Strong financial support provided by the institute/university to lessen the need for other income streams.

• Transparency about future employment perspectives within the institute/university

• Teacher training and practice as a mandatory part of the ESR's development.

• Ensuring that the supervisors complement one another so that they are advising on different aspects of the research.

• Having a clear hierarchy between the supervisors so that one has the final say on a particular issue.

• Ensuring that changing supervisor(s), if necessary, is as easy and painless as possible.

1.3. IMPROVING ESR LIFE

Research is often solitary work. A common risk for an ESR is that they feel isolated and alone. One way to mitigate this risk is by having regular informal gatherings with other PhD students

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and post-docs as well as grouping ESR researchers together. Ideally, The institute/faculty should support such gatherings eg by organising official meetings in ways that they also allow after to have these informal meetings, maybe foresee a budget to support informal meetings (restaurant, catering, short travel, etc.). Gatherings across faculty also support the establishment of important interdisciplinary networks.

4. SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Support is complicated. There are often a variety of sources and they all contribute in one way or another to how supported ESRs are or feel.

4.1.   SUPPORT FROM THE SUPERVISOR

The supervisor is of paramount importance. A good supervisor is engaged not only in their ESR's research but other aspects of academic life, enabling the ESR to find and pursue opportunities.

They should also where possible:

• Actively support the ESR in research and paper writing

• Help to manage the ESR's expectations.

• Discuss possible exit strategies (preparing the ESR for life after their PhD or Post-doc is complete).

• Encourage ESRs to be in touch with one other (independently of the supervisor).

• Induct the ESR into their own international network.

• Include the ESR in their funding applications.

• Give the ESR teaching responsibilities.

1.2.   SUPPORT FROM THE INSTITUTE/DEPARTMENT

The institute and department have other responsibilities towards the ESR which are more practical. These includes:

• Ensuring there is a place to work within the institute.

• Organising joint coffee and lunch breaks in the institute/department

• Organising informal gatherings of the institute/department.

• Offering financial support (for projects and travel); specifically, ensuring that each ESR is allotted a portion of the annual budget for conference travel.

• Providing development talks with someone other than the supervisor.

• Ensuring that research ethics advisers help with publication issues.

• Setting up mentoring programmes with other colleagues in the institute.

• Creating a PhD representative board, so that there is a representative in all important committees.

• Encouraging ESRs to study and research abroad.

1.3.   SUPPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY

1.3.1.   GRADUATE RESEARCH OFFICE

A Graduate Research Office can assist with any of the ESR's general queries not related specifically to the study programme or research. The office's responsibilities include:

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- Giving advice to ESRs and supervisors.

- Supporting potential supervisors (offering special courses for supervisors ahead of their ability to supervise).

- Providing mandatory courses for both ESRs and supervisors.

- Offering additional courses to those offered on PhD study specialist program (e.g. How to write research papers, how to write reviews, how to present at a conference, job interview advice, career options in academia, research ethics, conducting interviews, Non-Disclosure Agreements, copyright issues, how to write a teaching portfolio, etc.).

- Organising information days/meeting with ESRs.

- Organizing PhD conferences or facilitating the self-organization of ESR conferences

- Taking feedback on a regular basis from both supervisor and supervisee either submitted together or separately in order to identify any possible problems.

- Providing clear guidelines who can be a co-author and who cannot.

1.1.2.   CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Centre for Educational Development offers support for university pedagogy to all academic environments. They collaborate closely with university pedagogy at all levels. Their primary goals are to:

- Create opportunities for experiments and innovation within teaching and education in close collaboration with the professional environments.

- Offer research-based university pedagogical competence development.

- Give feedback on the university's educational choices.

- Create and develop the best possible digital framework for teaching.

- Participate actively in the university's pedagogical research.

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1.1.3. CAREER SERVICE CENTRE

Preparation for an academic career is provided by the Career Service Centre. Helping ESRs to begin their career during their studies by:

• Teaching local languages.

• Helping ESRs to find a part-time job or get transferable skills relevant to the job market.

• Organizing career workshops and activities.

• Providing opportunities to network with potential employers.

• Developing skills for entrepreneurship.

1.1.4. UNIVERSITY-WIDE PHD OR ESR BOARD

The PhD board or ESR board is a semi-formal institution which has a number of responsibilities, including:

• Arranging social events.

• Ensuring there is a representative in all important committees.

1.4. SUPPORT FROM ACADEMIC ASSOCIATIONS

Different academic associations, i.e., scholarly communities outside of the university, can offer support in a number of ways:

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- Organising doctoral summer schools.

- Offering mentoring programs.

- Enabling get-togethers with experienced scholars from other universities.

- Enabling informal get togethers (again with scholars from elsewhere).

- Helping establish an (international) network.

- Helping to understand operational procedures in other universities.

- Directing ESRs to funding and job opportunities in the field (through, for instance, mailing lists and websites)

1.5. SUPPORT FROM PEERS

Peers can offer one another support and feedback. This is where informal groupings and gatherings become necessary; not only to mitigate an ESR's risk of isolation but to engage with the ESR's work. This sort of exchange should be encouraged by supervisors, the institute, and the university.

3. ESR TYPE-DEPENDENT ISSUES

3.1. INDUSTRY PHDS

Industry PhD students offer a different set of risks due to their dual commitments to work and study.

Risks here include:

- Not having enough time to complete their coursework, research, or thesis.
- Having weaker motivation for research due to work commitments.

Ways of mitigating these risks include:

• Ensuring that the topic of the thesis is related to their industry employment.

• Sustain the intrinsic motivation to complete their studies.

• Adequate support from their employer.

1.2. POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS

Making a name for oneself as an ESR is difficult because the ESR has yet to develop their own team or fully realise their network. While senior researchers usually have the advantage of leading a research group that helps to increase their publication output, ESR often do not have

this advantage, yet. Many of the challenges that postdoctoral researchers face are the same that PhD researchers face. But some might be more specific, or more problematic.

Risks here include:

- Feeling unsupported without a supervisor.
- Not yet having a clear vision of their future or personal brand as an academic.

Ways of mitigating these risks include:

- Creating a formalised mentorship programme with senior researchers.
- Introductory courses/assistance understanding the unwritten rules of the country/institute they now work in.
- Providing self-reflexive workshops to help develop a vision of their academic future/personal brand as an academic.

1.3.   FOREIGN ESR

Foreign ESRs come from diverse and often very different cultural backgrounds and are entering an unfamiliar environment for the first time.

Risks here include:

- Not knowing enough about the country and university system they are now working in (post-doctoral researchers often come from abroad).
- Difficulty finding accommodation at the start of their study period.
- The language barrier (especially in acclimatising to a new country).

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- Confusion as to how to obtain a PhD in a foreign country (systems differ from country to country, therefore rules from their country of origin may not perfectly transfer to their country of study).

Ways of mitigating these risks include:

- University/institute offering accommodation.
- Providing cultural induction programmes/courses, understanding the unwritten rules of the country they now work in.
- Providing local language courses (this is also a good way to meet other ESRs)
- Clear explanations available for the process of obtaining a PhD in the country of study.

4. WHAT NEEDS CAN BE MET WITH WHAT ACTIVITIES

(1) Strong and maintained motivation (especially intrinsic motivation)

Ideally, the ESR chooses their own topic (if it is part of a project, it must be loose enough that the ESR can find their interest within it).

(2) Financial security

Regular salary provided by the state and/or by the university so that the ESR does not feel a strong need for other income streams. The University should also offer financial support for projects and travel.

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(3) Academic freedom

Supervisors assist the search for a topic without extensively interfering with the student's choices. ESRs should be able to freely choose some of their mandatory PhD courses, seeking for a fit with their research interest.

(4) Career preparation (for both inside and outside academia)

Training and career counselling should be provided by the supervisors, department and the institution. Ideally the supervisor should include the ESR in their funding applications. Additionally, the Graduate Research Office should offer additional courses to those offered on PhD study specialist programs with the aim of preparing the ESR for their career.

(5) Connections to the institute/department

The University/department should set up a mentoring programme with other colleagues to widen the ESRs connections within the institute. ESRs should be invited to regular meetings (e.g., institute meetings, staff meetings, etc.).

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(6) International networking

The supervisor should induct the ESR into their international network if possible. Likewise, the ESR should be encouraged to join an international academic association and establish their own network. ESRs should be encouraged to present their work at international research conferences and to participate in related doctoral consortia.

(7) Teaching experience

Teacher training and practice should be a mandatory part of the ESR's development (and a certain number of credits should be allocated to this work). The ESR's supervisor should also give them teaching responsibilities.

5. WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED AT WHAT STAGE

(1) Setting up the work relationship

After the potential ESR/PhD student has found their topic then they will need support finding the right supervisor for the topic to proceed with their application. If the supervisor/supervisee relationship has not already been established then the university/department can help facilitate meetings.

Once the application has been successful then help might be needed with accommodation. Additionally, the university/institute can help find a work space for the ESR.

(2) Beginning of the work relationship

Once the relationship has begun, it is necessary to provide information days about university/institute. A Welcome Day is also a good way for the ESR to meet colleagues and peers. During this period the ESR should be made aware of the facilities and support that is available to them (e.g. the Graduate Research Office, Career Service Centre, etc.).

(3) Middle of the work relationship

During the research period, professional development courses should be offered to help the ESR secure future employment. The ESR should also be encouraged to study abroad, present at different conferences, and get involved with different academic associations.

(4) Closing of the work relationship

Career Service Centre should help prepare the ESR for their academic career by organising career workshops and activities and providing opportunities to network with potential employers.

Additionally, the supervisor should help prepare an exit strategy and include the ESR in any applications for grants/support their applications for any follow-up positions. Coaching on writing their own funding applications, for instance for postdoctoral funding, will be relevant.

(5) After the contractual relationship (if it ends)

The Institute, department, university, and supervisor should endeavour to stay in touch through alumni mailing lists, alumni news, etc. As well as continuing to include ESR in applications for grants, offering them opportunities to be a guest lecturer, proposing possible co-authorship possibilities, etc.

6. RECOMMENDED READING

Phillips, E., & Pugh, D. (2015). *EBOOK: How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).