



In brief: Voice of Early-Career Researchers Study 2020

A study of research culture, researcher perceptions of their work and the research environment in the Global South.

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Cover image by Jonalyn Mateo, researcher, Philippines, Understanding seaweeds to understand farmers

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1 Executive Summary

In this time of global crisis, research and evidence are more important than ever. A new study from INASP shows that researchers in the Global South want their research to transform lives and are optimistic and positive about their ability to do so. The study piloted a [Research Positivity Index](#), which will monitor researcher perceptions of their work and their research environment in the coming years and help to build a better picture of research culture in the Global South.

The study also confirms some well-known challenges that southern researchers face, both at home and globally. These include gender inequity, inequity in research collaborations, access to funding, and an ongoing pressure to prioritise academic publishing over other types of impact.

Challenges can affect who chooses to be a researcher, the types of choices a researcher makes in their career, whether they will stay in that career, and where they carry out their research. Decision-makers and funders need to look at ways to address these inequities to better support early-career researchers in the Global South.

A full report of the study results is available at www.inasp.info/voice-ECRs-2020. This “In Brief” report shares key findings and an overview of next steps.

2 Why researcher positivity matters



Image credit: Ruwini Basnayake, researcher, Sri Lanka

The world needs skilled and passionate researchers to bring knowledge and solutions to address key global and local challenges and transform lives. In Agenda 2063¹, as well as in most national and regional development plans, there are ambitious visions for the role research can play in creating positive change. Yet in the Global South, the number of researchers per head is much lower than in the North². If researchers do not see rewarding and fulfilling careers ahead or feel that a research pathway comes at too high a cost, future research could be significantly at risk.

We need to continue to focus on equity within and between research systems and create solutions to address imbalances that favour some researchers or types of research over others. To support this, INASP is trying to build a more complete, evidence-based picture of researcher needs, motivations, and contexts, particularly in the Global South.

In April 2020, INASP asked researchers from 94 countries and across a wide spectrum of academic disciplines, to take part in a “Voice of Early-Career Researchers” study, to determine how the research environment is changing and

¹ Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. <https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf>

² Number of Researchers per million inhabitants by country, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, viewed 7th March, 2011, http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?URL_ID=3755&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.

affecting early-career researchers across the globe. The survey, funded by Sida, focused on researcher perceptions of their ability to achieve their research goals. It explored the opportunities and the challenges they face in their careers, and their contribution to national and international research systems.

Using the survey data, INASP piloted a new **Research Positivity Index**, to track **how researchers feel** about their research career and environment in the longer term. A researcher who feels positive about their choice of research career, believes they have sufficient opportunities to fulfil their research ambitions, can collaborate with others, receives adequate funding, and are supported by their institution, would score highly on the Index.

The Research Positivity Index

The pilot Research Positivity Index is designed to be straightforward and usable without a high level of statistical expertise. It is made of two components. One is related to researcher's personal experience of a research career – whether it is a career choice and offers opportunities for progression and development. The other is related to researcher perception of the research context – including institutional, national and international infrastructure. Higher overall numbers indicate higher levels of positivity.

As the approach is refined and becomes more embedded in future survey analysis we will use this index to track changes in positivity levels over time.

3 What did the survey tell us?

Researchers in the Global South are optimistic and positive about their careers

Overall, the study indicates that researchers in the Global South are optimistic and positive about their careers; 90% expect to remain in research over the next five years. They also believe strongly in the role of their research to transform lives and would like to see research culture and funding that prioritise longer term societal impact. They would also like to see more equitable collaborative research partnerships.

But there are still ongoing issues that need addressing to help researchers achieve these aims.

These challenges can affect who chooses to be a researcher, the types of choices a researcher makes in their career, whether they will stay in that career, and where they carry out their research.

The challenges include:

Research culture places emphasis on outputs rather than real-world impact and transforming lives

The wider system *still* tends to incentivise the publication and presentation of researcher work within academic circles over and above real-world impact. Publishing research, particularly in academic journals, remains a major pressure for researchers globally. All of this limits a researcher's ability to work on achieving other types of impact and focus on broader engagement to facilitate research use and uptake.

Early-career researchers struggle to get their voices heard

While early-career researchers across the globe face challenges in establishing their credibility, this is exacerbated for researchers in the Global South by the additional perceived bias against research published in national journals. Limited access and opportunity to publish in international journals, paired with lack of visibility and credibility of national academic publishing outlets means that many find it difficult to get their voice heard by local policymakers and practitioners, as well as on the global stage.

The study also points to inequities within, and between knowledge and research systems.

Gender balance needs to be addressed across the board

Women appear to have fewer opportunities in their careers and fewer published research outputs. They also feel less positive about their research careers than men and more uncertain about their future in research.

Southern researchers need better access to funding, both locally and globally

Insufficient access to research funding was an issue cited by nearly all respondents. It is particularly difficult for less experienced researchers to get the funding that they need for their research. International funding is also difficult to win. Funding was cited as likely to have the most positive or negative impact on a researcher's work in the future.

Research collaboration is critical and creates higher researcher positivity

In the survey, 87% said they thought that collaborating outside of their institution was vitally important. Researchers who had taken part in a research collaboration within their own country, or international collaboration had higher personal positivity than those who had not. And study respondents who had participated in an international research collaboration felt that their contributions had been sufficiently recognised.

However, many respondents felt that opportunities, funding, and support from donors, decision-makers and research institutions can be limited for Southern researchers and lead to inequitable partnerships; the balance is often tipped towards Northern or more senior peers. Obstacles included poor institutional support, time, and access to collaborators.



Image credit: Laxmi Sinchury, researcher, Nepal

4 Where next?

INASP will continue to develop the Research Positivity Index in 2021. As the approach is refined and becomes more embedded in future survey analysis we will use this index to track changes in positivity levels over time.

In the next study, we will examine differences in region, research discipline and type of institution to help pinpoint where more support may be needed and any lessons that can be learnt. We will also see if the global pandemic has had an impact on perceptions.



Image credit: Nicholas Karani, researcher, Kenya