Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges

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Introduction

In this chapter, we question the concept of 'formalised peer-support' workshops for Early Career Researchers (henceforth, ECRs), by analysing a selection of workshop abstracts and drawing on our own experiences as ECRs who have organised workshops for others in the early stages of their careers.

Although there are various definitions of ECRs across the academic literature, the definition that tends to be used is that of major funding bodies: four years post-PhD, regardless of the individual's situation. Breeze and Taylor (2018) explain that the categories used to talk about the various stages of an academic career do not reflect the plural and layered experiences of ECRs. This homogenisation of ECRs' experience masks other realities: the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Women, an increase in precarious contracts, lack of stability and career progression, and challenges related to family responsibilities, just to name a few.

This chapter aims to problematise the positions of 'expert' and 'ECR', and the idea of what actually counts as 'success'. We explore the tensions originating from embracing the 'expert' role in front of others ECRs; are we actually inducing the 'imposter syndrome' (Breeze, 2018) that we strive to alleviate for others and ourselves? Breeze (2018: 194) explains that imposter syndrome involves feelings of 'fraudulence and inauthenticity' in individuals who might think that they are inadequate and do not attribute their success to themselves, but rather think that accolades and professional achievements have been attributed to them by mistake. In this chapter, we argue that holding such a false impression of one's ability is quite common and

that feeling like an imposter is not always negative. More specifically, we assert that an individual who has not experienced that feeling is more likely to promote neoliberal practices and conventional ideas of success that diminish the development of critical awareness.

The first section of this chapter seeks to situate the issue of formalised peer-support in the early career stage in the broader context of the marketisation of higher education in the UK. In the second section, we provide an overview of the academic literature available on formalised peer-support for ECRs. Abstracts of UK-based ECR training events are presented and analysed in the third section. The fourth section presents two vignettes detailing workshops that we have organised. In the final section, we critically discuss our own experiences and provide suggestions for improving formalised peer-support in the early career stage.

The marketisation of higher education and its impacts on everyday work and success

There is a considerable amount of academic literature (e.g. Breeze, Taylor, and Costa, 2019; Pereira, 2016) that describes the neoliberal turn that universities in western countries have taken, shaping students and academics into competitive individuals in order to increase productivity, accountability and control (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Students and staff have to navigate this increasingly complex and stressful environment that has come to be known as the 'neoliberal' or 'entrepreneurial university' (Taylor, 2014; Taylor and Lahad, 2018). Ball (2012: 18) has defined neoliberalism as a 'complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of 'the market' as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations'.

In the United Kingdom (UK), academic practice has been commodified and market-like forms of governance can be recognised across universities (Ozga, 2008). For example, in order to compete in the global education marketplace, higher education institutions (HEIs) must develop a successful university brand and unique selling points (Chapelo, 2010; Lynch, 2006). They are also led by 'strategic directors' who view the university as a corporation based on targets and plans (Marginson, 1999) and respond to student demands, seeing the 'student as consumer' (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009). The *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) in th UK also puts increased pressure on academics to publish both abundantly and to a very high standard of quality (McCulloch, 2017). Universities' success is demonstrated in ways

that are quantifiably measurable (e.g. research outputs, research funds, student satisfaction surveys). We argue that these market practices not only shape what it means to be a 'successful university', but also what it means to be a 'successful researcher'.

The 'marketization' of higher education has fundamentally changed the nature of universities as a place of work, consequently shaping employees' behaviour and action. Analysing the experiences of HE employees across the UK, Addison (2016: 82) highlights uncertainty amongst HE employees, feelings of having to prove their 'worth' and demonstrate 'value for money'; leading to competition between colleagues, 'divisiveness' and a 'fragmented sense of collegiality'. Furthermore, the pressure to publish and to get ahead has been found to lead to anxiety and resistance (Locke, 2014). ECRs are not spared from this. They are forced to engage in these neoliberal practices in order to exist, or survive, in the workplace (Res-Sisters, 2017).

ECRs require support in order to learn how to 'play the game' (Addison, 2016). In a 'short-term investment for long term returns' logic (Browning, Thompson, and Dawson, 2014, 123), most universities offer training opportunities for ECRs so that they can gain the skills they need to become leaders in their field. Formalised support for ECRs is often focussed on preparing ECRs to survive in this competitive space, and in this sense, it normalises the market practices previously discussed. Against the backdrop of high expectations, competition, and pressurisation of time, ECRs can feel like imposters in academia. However, acknowledging this, Breeze (2018: 211), drawing on a feminist perspective, also considers the imposter syndrome as a 'resource for action and site of agency':

> embracing 'imposter syndrome' might offer one avenue for negotiating the ambivalence of being 'within and against', of trying to play the game and change the rules of the neoliberal university, and serve as a location of collective feminist action in higher education.

Feminist scholars working in the 'entrepreneurial university' (Taylor, 2014) are pressured to engage in neoliberal practices; a conflictual position that can generate feelings of ambivalence and discomfort. This pressure and the intersections of various axes (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) is an embodied experience that can make some bodies 'feel' out of place in academia (Puwar, 2004; Taylor and Lahad, 2018). Instead of seeing these issues as the individuals' problem, Breeze (2018) suggests that imposterism can be a resource to inform teaching and

research, as it challenges dominant conceptions of success and belonging in academia. In the context of supporting ECRs, we argue that imposterism can be used as a form of resistance against neoliberal market-based values, as a tool for building collaboration and collegiality between ECRs and to re-define the meaning of 'success' for ECRs.

Formalised Support for Early Career Researchers

There is a plethora of self-help books (e.g., Eley, Wellington, Pitts, and Biggs, 2012; Mewburn 2019) that often imply that ECRs should 'become' something else and that what they are at the moment is not good enough. They should be producers of high-quality output and research leaders (e.g., Browning, Thompson, and Dawson, 2014). The ideas of 'becoming' and 'arriving' have already been problematised by Breeze and Taylor (2018: 12) who critically define the 'academic arrival' that is often established through 'institutional rewards' and recognition. In addition to 'becoming', self-help books, in their content and titles, also suggest that ECRs must learn how to 'survive' in this increasingly competitive and challenging environment (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2012; Woodthrope, 2018). This type of language creates a sense of danger and precarity, suggesting that only the strongest candidates will 'make it' in the academic 'hunger games' (Lemon, 2018: 29). As a result, it is not uncommon for some ECRs to have feelings of imposterism. They may have anxiety and may self-doubt believing that others have more knowledge, are more capable compared to them (Sakulku and Alexander, 2011), and that they need additional help from 'experts' (Parkman, 2016).

Mentoring is often seen as one of the most useful forms of support for ECRs, meaning that more experienced researchers or ECRs help newcomers find their way in the system. As noted by Crome, Meyer, and Hugues (2019: 729), most universities would rather invest in training sessions and workshops than in mentoring programmes to achieve 'greater economies of scale'. The present chapter therefore focuses on training sessions and workshops as they embody more strongly the neoliberal or entrepreneurial university practices.

In order to categorise, analyse and compare our examples of formalised peer-support, we have identified two contrastive approaches to formalised ECR support: 1) 'Fit the mould', and 2) 'Seek collaboration, solidarity and resistance' emerging from our literature review of studies on support and training opportunities for ECRs. The first approach is geared towards

supporting ECRs to adapt to the demands of the system, to 'learn how to play the game' in order to 'fit in'. The second approach offers an alternative by promoting solidarity and developing critical awareness of the neoliberal university. Each approach makes different assumptions about what it means to be an ECR, who can and who cannot be an expert and what 'success' means in academia.

Fit the mould

In their study of Australian research leaders, Browning, Thompson and Dawson (2014, 2017: 372) identify factors that contributed to their success as researchers: 'having a research doctorate, being mentored, attending conferences, supervising postgraduate students, being part of an active research group, receiving assistance to develop grant applications, financial startup, [and] funds to help establish their research careers'. The authors argue that ECRs should therefore be trained in these specific elements. These findings are not surprising as most self-help books, workshops and training programmes aimed at ECRs focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills around publication, funding, knowledge exchange, academic writing, social media, supervision, research methods, and teaching. However, Crome, Meyer, Bosanquet and Hughes (2019) found that this type of training provision is not always perceived as being useful by ECRs. Browning, Thompson and Dawson (2017) also point out that it took on average fourteen years for their participants to become 'research leaders', and around five years post-PhD to establish a track-record. These results are concerning, as they can encourage a 'best before date' logic if taken on board in the design of training opportunities for ECRs. They also imply that there is one form of success that really matters and only one particular way to succeed.

Reynolds and her colleagues (2017) interviewed women in Australia who took part in a training programme for ECRs and found that they conceptualised success in academia beyond its conventional definition. The requirement to meet the research metrics was mentioned as a form of success, but the participants also considered that having a good work/life balance, making a difference, doing something they love, and having freedom and flexibility were all important forms of success. These findings show that for ECRs there is much more to academia than

'becoming research leaders'. These other aspects are not always part of, or take a marginal place in, training opportunities for ECRs.

Seek Collaboration, Solidarity and Resistance

In contrast to the 'fit the mould' approach described above, other authors have explored more collaborative, caring, and critical ways of offering support to ECRs. Such an approach was adopted by the Puāwai Collective in New Zealand through three practical interventions—a writing collective, a research network, and an interactive seminar. They aimed to do things differently, but also 'well', signifying doing 'well' at work, by committing to their work, but also promoting personal 'well-being', driven by an 'ethics of care for the self and others' (Puāwai Collective 2019: 38). Their interventions made care work in academia more visible, offered them time to build trusting relationships with other members, and valorised alternative forms of labour to those promoted by the neoliberal university.

In the same vein, the Res-Sisters (2017), a group of early career feminist researchers in UK universities, have created a 'Manifesta'; a set of suggestions addressed to ECRs for disrupting or challenging the neoliberal university: 'Embrace collectivity and nurture allies, Little acts of solidarity make a big difference, Speak out, Recognise your power and privilege, Self-care is a must, and Have fun'. These resonate strongly with the Puāwai Collective's concerns (2019) and link with the other forms of success valued by ECRs in the study conducted by Reynolds's and her colleagues (2017).

Macoun and Miller (2014) reflected on their experiences of being ECRs and on the importance of the support group networks they attended over that period. In particular, they discuss their experience of taking part in a Feminist Reading Group (FRG) that offered them a space where solidarity and resistance could be operated as they were able to share individual stories but also frame these stories in their broader picture; identifying structural problems characteristic of the neoliberal university. According to Gill and Donaghue (2016), the sharing of 'imposter syndrome' stories generally emphasises the individuals' inadequacies rather than the structural issues causing anxiety, stress and unhealthy competitiveness. However, the benefits of ECR workshops reside in the 'way they break isolation and provide a space for discussing shared difficulties and frustrations' (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 97).

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

While formalised training events for ECRs might be here to stay, as it is clear that there is a need for support at the beginning of an academic career, they do not have to follow a 'fit the mould' approach and could encourage more collaboration and solidarity. This chapter will examine the nature of existing provision and reflect on the extent to which formalised ECR events could be subversive spaces for genuine exchange as a site of agency vis-à-vis the neoliberal university.

Analysis of ECR workshop titles and abstracts

Educational research organisations, such as the European Education Research Association (EERA), the British Education Research Association (BERA) and the Scottish Education Research Association (SERA), have become central actors in shaping the ECR experience, driven by their self-determined goals to advance 'research quality' and build 'research capacity', terminology common to neoliberal academia. Closely linked to universities, these organisations offer regular training events and workshops for ECRs. By analysing a sample of abstracts we explore the nature of these spaces, their approaches and the different ways in which they create ideas of 'experts', 'ECRs' and 'success'.

We have analysed a selection of ECR training events and workshops in our field of research, education, between 2015 and 2019 provided under the roof of two UK-based research associations that we all are or have been affiliated with (BERA and SERA). Online databases from 2015 to 2019 were searched and relevant abstracts were selected; similar sessions were removed to avoid duplication, as were the two sessions selected as vignettes further in this chapter. Document content analysis (Schreier, 2018) was used to analyse the language used and to uncover the themes initially identified in the literature review presented above. The analysis was guided by the following questions: 1) How are 'ECRs' positioned? 2) How are 'experts' positioned? 3) What does 'success' look like? The following table provides an overview of the titles of ten ECR training events and initial themes. A more detailed analysis is then presented after the table.

Table 1. Analysis of ECR Support Events offered by BERA and SERA

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

Title	**Categories of analysis**		
	1) ECR	*2)Expert*	*3) Success*
Trials and Tribulations? Struggles and Successes in the Post-PhD Phase	Struggling; in need of reflection; responsible for changing their own future; at a 'critical career stage'	Informative; experienced; enablers; empowering	Negotiating challenges and moving forwards in linear progression
Academic Writing Workshop	Not part of the 'Academic Publications World'; newcomers; inexperienced; needing support; not productive	Part of the 'Academic Publications World'; productive; knowledgeable; experienced in writing	Joining the 'academic world'; publications; research metrics; linear progression
Postgraduate Symposium Series: Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Research	In need of a 'safe' space; alone; stuck	Experienced academics; not 'peers'	Signifiers of professional success; research metrics; leadership positions; linear progression
Becoming and Being an Early Career Researcher - identity, practice and serendipity	Fledging; newcomers; emerging; un-supported	Able to provide 'strategies' for career progression; emerged academic (already here)	Research outputs; funding; dealing with 'imposter syndrome'; development of a professional identity; enjoying research; non-linear

Practical Issues in Conducting Educational Research	Inexperienced; lacking in knowledge; stuck; lonely	Peers; experienced academics selected for discussant role	Receiving feedback from experienced academics; sharing
Introduction to Publishing for Early Career Researchers	Lack of knowledge about publishing; undiscoverable; unpublished	Journal editors; journal publishers (e.g. Wiley)	Research metrics; publications; understanding of the 'publishing process'; linear progression
Academic Writing for Early Career Researchers: Ask the Authors and Reviewers	New writers; in-experienced; lacking knowledge about publishing process; not journal reviewers	Panel members; academics who have 'published extensively'; signifiers of professional success	Publications; understanding of peer review process; linear progression
Stretched Across the [Early] Career?	ECR is difficult to define; ever-extending	Supportive	Collaborative; peer-support; resistance to institutional expectations; non-linear
Using Social Theory: The art of application	Lacking in knowledge of this area; stuck; in need of support	Experienced in 'applying' social theory;	Confident in applying social theory to research
The Essential Guide to Publishing for the Research Student	Un-published; newcomers	Well-published	Published; building a 'publication profile'; linear progression

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

How are ECRs positioned?

Across all of the sessions, there were no attempts to define the ECR in relation to categories based on time. Some mentioned doctoral students, post-PhD and practitioner researchers, while others used terms such as 'newcomers', 'emerging' and 'new writers'. There was only one exception to this: a workshop that explicitly problematised the idea of ECRs as a category, highlighting its non-linearity and the disconnection between early, mid and established career statuses. Although the majority of sessions did not provide a set definition of ECR, each communicated a specific image: for example, the 'inexperienced' ECR, the 'stuck' ECR, or the 'unpublished' ECR. In almost every case, the ECR experience was positioned as difficult, unsupported, isolating and as the most 'critical' stage in an academic career. Abstracts mentioned various pressures associated with the neoliberal university such the 'pressure to publish', doctoral completion, career progression, productivity and the need to become knowledgeable in specific areas of the research process, such as ethics, data collection and social theory.

How are 'experts' positioned?

In the majority of sessions, the event leaders were positioned by the text as the 'experts' but this was a broad category that included panels of experienced academics, fellow ECRs, selected discussants from the academic community, journal editors and publishers. One commonality here was the use of research metrics and 'signifiers of professional success' (Breeze, 2018) to justify the position of the 'expert'. In one case, lengthy profiles were provided for workshop discussants, including information on various leadership positions, records of 'extensive' publications in peer reviewed journals, prestigious awards and editorial positions. A small number of sessions were led by ECRs, positioned as 'peers', but they were usually accompanied by 'experienced academics' or were ECRs who had 'arrived' in a particular destination, such as the position of ECR network convenor or an academic post within a university. One writing workshop was based on the concept of there being an 'Academic Publications World', and the abstract provided a distinction between those who existed within this space (workshop leaders) and those who existed outside of that space (ECRs). There was only one session in which the position of 'expert' was left unoccupied, the session leader

instead taking on the role of mediating participation for collective learning instead of 'knowledge digestion' (Taylor, 2014).

What does success look like?

In the majority of sessions, descriptions of ECR success drew on the 'fit the mould' approach to success. Training was offered in specific predetermined areas that are required for career progression within the neoliberal university, such as writing techniques, publishing, data collection and ethics; success was positioned as increased knowledge or productivity in these areas. Moving forwards, 'negotiating challenges' and overcoming barriers were all positioned as important stages of ECR success, but were often spoken about in an individualised manner: ECRs are responsible for changing their own future. Although many of the sessions used terms such as 'peer-support', 'building new networks' and 'collaboration', this was almost always within the context of gaining knowledge to enable the collection of 'signifiers of professional success' (Breeze, 2018), such as peer-reviewed publications. There were two exceptions to this: one workshop positioned collaboration, peer-support and resistance as alternative forms of success, while the abstract for an ECR conference keynote speech mentioned the importance of enjoying research.

It is clear that support for ECRs, in the small sample of events and workshops analysed above, replicated the 'fit the mould' approach, preparing ECRs for 'survival' in the neoliberal university. Although there were a small number of exceptions to this and elements of workshops that appeared to promote collective learning and resistance, this was not the norm. While this analysis provides some important insights into the nature and purpose of formalised support, it is important to bear in mind that this is from an outsider perspective and can only draw findings from publicly available text. In order to explore these findings in more depth, this chapter now presents two reflective vignettes that describe two separate ECR workshops from the perspectives of their organisers.

Vignette 1: 'Surviving the PhD: Stories from the other side'

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

In November 2018, three of us arranged a session for ECRs as part of the SERA annual conference in Glasgow. The three presenters had all recently made the step from being a PhD student to full-time positions in academia. The intention behind this session was to provide alternative perspectives on issues that we found challenging as ECRs, and to give hands-on advice. The session consisted of three short presentations as starters for discussion among the participants: 1) *How to tame the supervisors: experiences from both sides*; 2) *The PhD does not have to be a lonely experience: the benefits of writing retreats*; 3) *Academic procrastination: understanding and avoiding it.*

The first presenter shared his personal experience of being supervised, considering the supervisor-supervisee relationship from a master-apprentice perspective. The presenter suggested that PhD students, instead of simply accepting their supervisors' suggestions because of their hierarchical position, should learn to work more independently and innovatively.

In the second part of the session, the presenter drew on her experience and research findings to introduce the concept of writing retreats as a way to break social isolation in academia. This was set within the context of the neoliberal university and intensified pressure on PhD students and ECRs.

Elaborating further on the struggle to write, the third presentation discussed procrastination issues and presented different 'tools' to overcome avoidance behaviour. The presenter introduced herself as a 'master procrastinator', admitting her own issues with writing.

Although perhaps unintentionally, all three presenters took on the role of 'expert', seemingly qualified by their previous experience in their doctoral studies. We positioned ourselves as different, as having 'arrived' at a 'safe destination'. This was not only evident in the content of the workshop, but also within its title: 'stories from the *other* side'. This title positioned attendees as inhabiting a different space. Assumptions were not only made about existing levels of knowledge, productivity, understanding and awareness, but also about the nature of their experiences. 'Top tips' in the form of solutions, ideas, techniques and online applications were provided in order to help ECRs to 'become' something better and conceptions of 'success' aligned with the expectations of the neoliberal university: successful supervision relationships, publications and productivity.

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

Although we felt that it would be helpful to display vulnerability and share honest reflections of the difficulties that we face, it is possible that this had the same effect as sharing 'imposter syndrome' stories (Gill and Donaghue, 2016): to emphasise personal inadequacies rather than the wider structural issues that cause them. Although one presentation positioned writing, and the increased pressure on ECRs to write, within its wider context, highlighting the expectations of the academic 'game', there was limited space for collective consideration of ways to resist these expectations; alternative versions of the 'game' were not considered.

Vignette 2: 'Data analysis in educational research: triumphs, troubles and dilemmas'

In September 2016, the first joint postgraduate research event organised by BERA and SERA took place at the University of Glasgow. The aim of the event was to bring together doctoral students at various stages of their studies to share their plans and experiences of different data analysis methods and analytic frameworks. There were eleven participants: a teaching and research fellow, a research assistant and nine doctoral students. The seminar was facilitated by three academics working as lecturers in education (including one of the authors of this chapter) who also shared their doctoral research experiences.

The first and the second part of the event included short presentations from the participants about their PhD research and their thoughts about their data analysis followed by discussions. The third part of the event focused on three different approaches to data analysis: quantitative, qualitative, and discourse analysis. Participants rotated through the three thematic stations in order to gain a deeper understanding. The three lecturers were positioned as 'the experts' for each type of analysis. At the core of the seminar was peer discussion and support.

This event reflects the current discourse that ECRs form a vulnerable group that requires support in order to 'survive' and succeed (e.g. Browning, Thompson, and Dawson, 2014). This understanding that ECRs lack knowledge and experience and that they need additional help by an 'expert' to become 'something better' and more competitive in the job market are key principles of the neoliberal university. The participants' feedback received after the session indicated feelings of lacking knowledge, skills and confidence evidencing how 'neo-liberalism affects our hearts and minds' (Brooks et, al. 2016: 1214) as well as our productivity. Contrariwise, the three academics who facilitated the sessions were seen as 'experts' who could

scaffold participants' learning, even though they were also themselves ECRs. Although it aimed at peer-discussion and networking, the session adopted a 'fit the mould' perspective as it taught ECRs 'additional' knowledge so that they could succeed and improve their professional development. This vignette and the previous one both reflect the 'hidden' curriculum of this environment and the explicit or implicit messages that ECRs receive.

Discussion and conclusions

In the neoliberal university, ECRs are identified as requiring additional support in order to succeed, and survival is achieved through productivity and competition. In that context, feelings of 'inauthenticity' can emerge as individuals might think that they are not good or able enough, linking to the concept of imposter syndrome (Breeze, 2018). Our review of literature allowed us to identify two contrastive strands of work regarding the support or training offered to ECRs: 'Fit the mould' and 'Seek Collaboration, Solidarity and Resistance'. We are aware that there exist other approaches in between, especially mentoring, but we found this duality useful to inform our thinking and analysis.

Our analysis of training sessions and workshops offered to ECRs by two research associations has revealed that, apart from a few exceptions, most support offered framed success in terms of meeting the neoliberal university's requirements (e.g. being REF-able). The ECRs were often positioned as not having much agency, being at the receiving end of 'experts'' advice. Our findings confirm the dominance of the 'fit the mould' approach identified in the literature review.

In the two vignettes, we critically looked at our own experience of organising workshops for ECRs. This exercise made us feel uneasy. We were shocked to see that one of the sessions was called 'Surviving the PhD'. Our 'by default' starting point was the sharing of tips and of personal experiences that fitted a discourse of 'becoming' and 'surviving'. With hindsight, we would do things differently. We felt a certain discomfort at preparing such a session for other ECRs: 'Who are we to tell others about success?' 'How can we tell others how to 'arrive' if we do not feel that we have fully 'arrived''? Taylor (2014), a more experienced researcher, recalls her own feelings of discomfort when she was asked to deliver a workshop for ECRs about how to prepare a 'winning funding application'. Taylor (2014: 2) felt that she had to 'workshop

[her] way out' of this uncomfortable position: 'To 'workshop' something, in my mind, is to participate, to join in, to creatively contribute and collectively learn (rather than to disseminate, digest or 'transfer' knowledge from entering-to-exiting the room).' We all need to find ways of 'workshopping' our ways out of training sessions and other activities that continue to ignore other important forms of success for ECRs such as having a good life balance, making a difference with our work, being passionate and enjoying what we are doing, having freedom and flexibility, and caring for each other (Bosanquet et, al., 2017; Puāwai Collective, 2019; Reynolds et, al., 2017).

ECRs, even if they feel like imposters, and even if they make mistakes like we did during our sessions, should not be afraid to lead the way in proposing workshops that offer alternative ways of doing things, following the examples of the Puāwai Collective (2019) and the Res-Sisters (2017). We argue that feeling like an imposter is a good position to inhabit when offering training sessions to other ECRs. Someone who has not experienced that feeling, we argue, is more likely to uncritically promote neoliberal practices and conventional ideas of success. The content of training sessions for ECRs should not be taken for granted and must be problematised: What type of success is being promoted? Imposters can feel the tensions, the discomfort related to 'playing the game', or as Breeze (2018: 211) puts it, imposters are 'within and against'.

We agree with our colleagues from the Puāwai Collective (2019) and the Res-Sisters (2017) that resistance will be achieved through solidarity. ECR workshops, training sessions, and the sharing of stories, can all be reappropriated as sites of agency. Through networks of support and activities that help ECRs to identify structural issues in personal stories, they are able to resist aspects of the neoliberal university. We recognise that adopting such a critical approch comes with risks (e.g. being targeted as a troublemaker) for the individuals involved, but if this is done in a protected space for ECRs, it is worth doing. Similar to Gill and Donaghue (2016), we argue that the benefits of ECR workshops are not the top tips provided but rather how they bring people together.

Despite their good intentions, training sessions that locate professional development for ECRs in discourses of competitiveness and productivity are damaging and can reinforce feelings of imposter syndrome in some. We maintain that training or support events for ECRs do not have to follow a 'fit the mould' approach and should encourage more collaboration and solidarity.

Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

When asked to deliver workshops or training to other ECRs or PhD students, ECRs should consider how agency and forms of resistance could exist in that space.

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Formalised Peer-Support for Early Career Researchers: potential for resistance and genuine exchanges - Virginie Thériault, Anna Beck, Stella Mouroutsou and Jakob Billmayer

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