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Capacity Building of Early Career Researchers to support a future thriving and sustainable CCS sector

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Abstract

Building the skills and workforce required to deploy Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) at scale continues to be an underpinning challenge to the commercialisation of CCS, alongside the upskilling and cross-skilling of existing workforces required to meet the needs of industry to deliver CCS in a sustainable and just way. The UK government's Carbon Capture Utilisation and Storage (CCUS) ambitions envision 50,000 jobs (including in utilisation) in CCUS by 2030ⁱ: more jobs than in the current UK offshore oil and gas industry. However, as at-scale CCS remains an emerging sector in the UK and Europe, many of the roles that will be available do not yet exist. This context means that policy and action from a range of stakeholders within and beyond CCS is required to ensure an effective workforce is in operation to meet the UK's climate ambitions.

The UK CCS Research Centre (UKCCSRC) has operated an Early Career Researcher (ECR) programme since 2012 and has worked closely with other key stakeholders across the CCS sector to enhance the value and extent of the opportunities provided to ECRs. The programme supports an international community of UK based researchers, and offers networking and development activities intended to build capacity.

Here we examine the UKCCSRC experience to understand whether and how the UKCCSRC's ECR programme has supported skills development and opportunities for career progression, and how these experiences have been taken forward into the range of career pathways taken by UKCCSRC ECR alumni.

To achieve these aims, we mapped and analysed UKCCSRC activities supplemented by a survey of ECR Alumni:

- a) The programme developed by the UKCCSRC to enable its ECRs to gain the wide range of skills, networking and collaboration opportunities needed to support their future careers.
- b) The progression routes and roles that UKCCSRC ECR alumni have taken since 2012, and how this is supporting the current deployment of CCS at different levels.
- c) What has worked well, what has proven challenging, and key learnings for institutions looking to support

ECR opportunities and skills development to enable a flourishing CCS sector.

Our findings shed light on the role of research networks and institutes in working alongside the CCS stakeholder community to nurture the workforce of the future. Our analysis highlights how established and new partnerships have been, and will continue to be, crucial for delivering a meaningful multidisciplinary programme for supporting ECR development. We pose recommendations for research networks such as UKCCSRC to continue to build an inclusive and flourishing environment for ECRs, and to play a role in supporting a connected pipeline of talent ready to deliver the CCS sector of today and tomorrow, and ultimately to ensure a sustainable transition to net zero

Keywords: early career; future workforce; capacity building;

1. Introduction

Since 2012, the UK CCS Research Centre (UKCCSRC, www.ukccsrc.ac.uk) has supported PhD students, Research Assistants and Post-Doctoral Research Associates (PDRAs) working in CCS and related areas of research through its Early Career Researcher (ECR) programme. This programme recognises the importance of diverse, multidisciplinary and talented leaders to meet the demand of deploying CCS at scale, and the role of supportive interventions and measures to enable development opportunities and networking opportunities for ECRs which not all Higher Education Institutes (Universities and Research Institutes) can offer. Supporting ECRs is particularly important for several reasons. The majority of PhD and postdoctoral researchers leave higher education and research for industry and other roles (HEPI, 2020ⁱⁱ), and so the emerging CCS sector will likely employ UKCCSRC ECR alumni. In addition, there will continue to be a growing need for research and education in CCS as the sector develops. UKCCSRC ECRs are an international community of researchers based at UK research institutions, and talent nurtured within this community will support CCS knowledge and development globally. Finally, the energy sector, and the CCS sector, is currently lacking in diversity; interventions to support a diverse and inclusive culture, like those the UKCCSRC ECR programme provide, can help ensure an effective, diverse and thriving workforce is in place to meet the UK's net zero ambitions.

For over a decade, the UKCCSRC's ECR programme has delivered a continuous, diverse and evolving portfolio of development opportunities for ECRs. These opportunities have included funding to collaborate with national and international organisations; funding for their own research work as Principal Investigators; travel bursaries to attend conferences; travel and funding support for wider opportunities including the IEAGHG International CCS Summer School; and focused awaydays for community building and cross-disciplinary skills development. The programme has also acted as intermediary to facilitate ECR opportunities such as industrial placements and secondments. Many of the UKCCSRC ECR alumni have progressed into CCS related roles across academia, industry, government, NGOs and other organisations.

To date, however, no formal analysis of these experiences and the destinations of ECR programme alumni has been undertaken. Here, we address this gap. Through analysing UKCCSRC activities and a survey of ECR alumni we examine the UKCCSRC experience to understand whether and how the UKCCSRC's ECR programme has supported skills development and opportunities for career progression, and how these experiences have been taken forward into the range of career pathways taken by UKCCSRC ECR alumni.

2. [UKCCSRC ECR Programme](#)ⁱⁱⁱ

2.1 ECR Definition

The UKCCSRC definition of an ECR is someone working or studying at a UK University who meets one of the following criteria:

- a) PhD student studying a CCS or CCUS-related topic

- b) In a lectureship or equivalent (i.e. fellowship) post for less than five years (with the exception of career breaks for any reason)
- c) PDRA or equivalent with a permanent or fixed term contract

2.2 [ECR Awaydays](#)^{iv}

ECR Awaydays are an important part of the UKCCSRC ECR programme, connecting ECRs working on CCS from different institutions and disciplines. There are typically two Awaydays per year, and topics for these have ranged from communication skills (including effectively communicating your research and communicating to the general public) to careers workshops and have also included site tours of research and industrial facilities. Ideas for Awayday topics and activities are shaped by feedback received from the ECRs to deliver a programme and activities that they are keen to engage with. In 2024, 49 ECRs from 19 institutions participated in UKCCSRC Awaydays.

2.3 [Funding Opportunities](#)^v

The UKCCSRC offers a range of funding opportunities for ECRs. Through these funding mechanisms, opportunities have been opened to ECRs who may not have had access to this support at their own institution (or who cannot access other types of research funding) and has enabled ECRs to engage where they may not have had the opportunity to do so otherwise. Funding opportunities have included:

- a) **[Meeting Fund](#)**^{vi}: This fund covers travel and accommodation costs for ECRs to attend UKCCSRC-led conferences, awaydays and workshops. Through this funding mechanism, in 2024 alone, we made 82 awards, supporting 57 different ECRs from 21 different institutions.
- b) **[Flexible Funding](#)**^{vii}: Since 2022, UKCCSRC ECRs have been eligible to apply to the UKCCSRC Flexible Funding call to enable them to lead research projects, and so further develop leadership and project management skills. The applications received from, and funding awarded to, ECRs through this call has increased year on year with seven awards made to ECRs in 2024.
- c) **[Collaboration Fund](#)**^{viii}: The ECR Collaboration Award enables ECRs to collaborate with experts outside their home institution on areas within CCS, through the provision of support for travel, accommodation and subsistence. Collaborations took place within the UK and with relevant overseas organisations. Since 2018, ten collaboration funds have been awarded (prior to 2016, this was known as the International Exchange Fund).
- d) **[Activity Fund](#)**^{ix}: The Activity Fund was created following feedback from ECRs that they would like the opportunity to organise their own activities, to allow groups of ECRs to collaborate in areas of interest to them. The fund enables ECRs to organise their own activities, and any activity relevant to CCS, and free for UKCCSRC ECRs to attend, were considered for the Fund. Activities have included workshops, symposia, conferences and webinars.
- e) **Travel Support**: Travel support is available to ECRs who are successful in gaining a place at [IEAGHG's summer school](#)^x and to support travel costs for ECRs giving an oral presentation or presenting a poster at IEAGHG's [GHGT conferences](#)^{xi}. Travel support is also regularly provided to ECRs to attend UKCCSRC Conferences and ECR AwayDays through the Meeting Fund.

2.4 [ECR Net Zero Conference](#)^{xii}

The UKCCSRC established and led the organisation of the ECR Net Zero conferences which took place in 2022 and 2024. The conference was co-hosted with 13 other research centres working across net zero topics. Each event brought together over 200 ECRs, providing an opportunity to meet and network with peers from different research organisations within the wider net zero research community, and build a more collaborative, multidisciplinary community.

2.5 ECR Experience and Opportunities

The UKCCSRC ECR programme offers the following additional experiences and opportunities:

- a) **[ECR Working Group](#)**^{xiii}: The ECR Working Group was established in 2021 to deliver a targeted and relevant programme of activities that support ECR needs, including skills development and network building. The Working Group helps to steer the ECR programme, organise ECR events and represents the UKCCSRC ECR community as part of the UKCCSRCs Advisory Council.
- b) **Poster Presentation and Awards**: The UKCCSRC holds at least two conferences per year, and each conference includes poster presentations as part of the programme, with typically over 30 posters presented by ECRs. ECR posters are judged by industry and academic experts, and a poster prize awarded to the top three posters at the end of the conference.
- c) **Conference Oral Presentation**: The [Knowledge Exchange \(KE\) Conference](#)^{xiv} includes a call for abstracts, welcoming abstracts from different stakeholders and career stages. At the 2024 KE Conference, oral presentations were given by ten ECRs.
- d) **Abstract Review Committee**: As well as a call for abstracts for the KE Conference, there is a call for applications to join the Abstract Committee which decides the allocation of oral and poster presentations. For the 2024 KE Conference, four of the 23 members on the panel were ECRs.
- e) **CCS Communications Competition**: The UKCCSRC has held two communications competitions - a [CCS visual communications](#)^{xv} competition in 2023 and a [CCS video communication](#)^{xvi} competition in 2021. The winning entries were published on the UKCCSRC website with [one illustration, by Dr Mathew D. Wilkes, going global](#)^{xvii}!

3. ECR Alumni Survey

3.1 Background

A survey to send to ECR alumni was designed to find out what type of sector ECRs were now working in, and if they were still working in CCS, energy or something entirely different and also which UKCCSRC ECR opportunities had been taken advantage of, and whether and how these helped build capacity or career development.

The survey consisted of an online questionnaire which was open for responses from 1st August to 30th September 2024. It included 18 questions (11 quantitative, 7 qualitative), available in appendix 1. Recruitment methods for responses included communications through the UKCCSRC newsletter, social media channels (LinkedIn and X) and direct emails to ECR alumni (a bulletin was sent to the UKCCSRC newsletter subscribers which has over 1,900 subscribers, not all of whom will have been part of the ECR programme).

In total, 41 responses were received. Of these, 38 (93%) indicated that they are actively engaged with the UKCCSRC.

3.2 What themes emerged from qualitative responses?

Responses to qualitative questions (questions 17 ‘In what ways has the UKCCSRC supported or enabled you on your career path, and/or to get to where you are today?’ & 18 ‘When you were an ECR, were there any other ways the UKCCSRC supported you?’) were thematically analysed. Respondents feel they benefited from the ECR programme through the key themes identified and defined in Table 1.

| Key Theme | | Definition: Respondents felt they benefitted from UKCCSRC ECR programme via... | Number of respondents mentioning key theme |
|-----------|--------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Networking | Networking opportunities offered by UKCCSRC | 29 |
| 2 | Funding | Funding opportunities offered by UKCCSRC, including flexible funding, the meeting fund, activity fund, travel fund and collaboration fund | 15 |
| 3 | Skills development | Professional and transferable skills development (not necessarily CCS-specific) | 12 |
| 4 | Knowledge | Gaining specific and sector wide knowledge on CCS through engagement with UKCCSRC activities and network | 7 |
| 5 | Application | Developing understanding of the wider context in which CCS R&D applies (such a 'real-world' applications, or policy considerations) | 3 |
| 6 | Collaboration | Fostering collaboration through UKCCSRC activities and funding. | 6 |
| 7 | Application | Developing understanding of the wider context in which CCS R&D applies (such a 'real-world' applications, or policy considerations) | 3 |

Table 1 defines the key themes identified through thematic analysis of responses to two qualitative questions included in the ECR alumni survey and the number of respondents mentioning these.

Networking (Table 1, Theme 1) was a significant theme, occurring in 29 (71%) responses. Thus, a key benefit from the UKCCSRC ECR programme is the networking opportunities it provides. Funding opportunities and skills development were also mentioned by 15 (36%) and 12 (29%) respondents respectively.

3.3 What organisation types are ECR alumni working in now?

UKCCSRC ECR alumni were asked what type of organisation they were now working for. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of respondents (24, 59%) work in Higher Education, followed by industry (10, 24% of respondents).

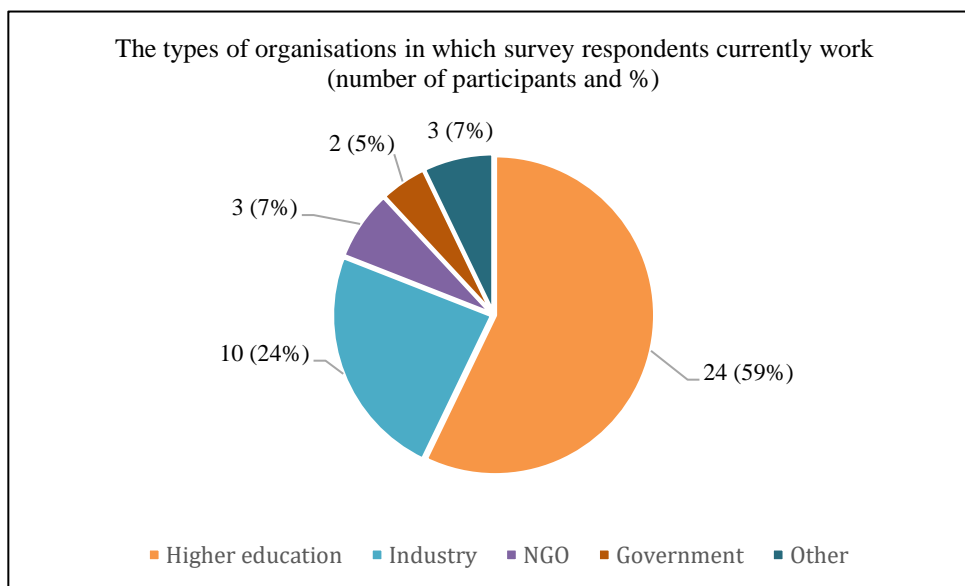


Figure 1: The organisation that questionnaire respondents now work (NGO = Non Governmental Organisation).

3.4 Are ECR alumni working in CCS?

We were interested to know whether the emerging CCS sector in the UK is employing UKCCSRC ECR alumni. We find that 33 (80%) respondents are still working in CCS with 4 (10%) indicating they work in an adjacent sector (response - other) and 4 (10%) no longer working in CCS (response - no). For those still working in CCS, 28 (85%) work in CCS over 60% of the time. Responses indicate that those no longer working in CCS, or working in adjacent sectors work across energy, chemicals and catalysis, process engineering for emissions reduction and wastewater treatment, and energy storage, including hydrogen.

Table 2 below provides an overview of those who did not indicate ‘yes’ and their current organisation type and role.

The survey also highlighted that many of the respondents often work on a mixture of topics, of which CCS is one (often dominant). Figure 2 highlights the responses to this question where participants had a sliding scale to indicate the percentage of their role that was related to CCS.

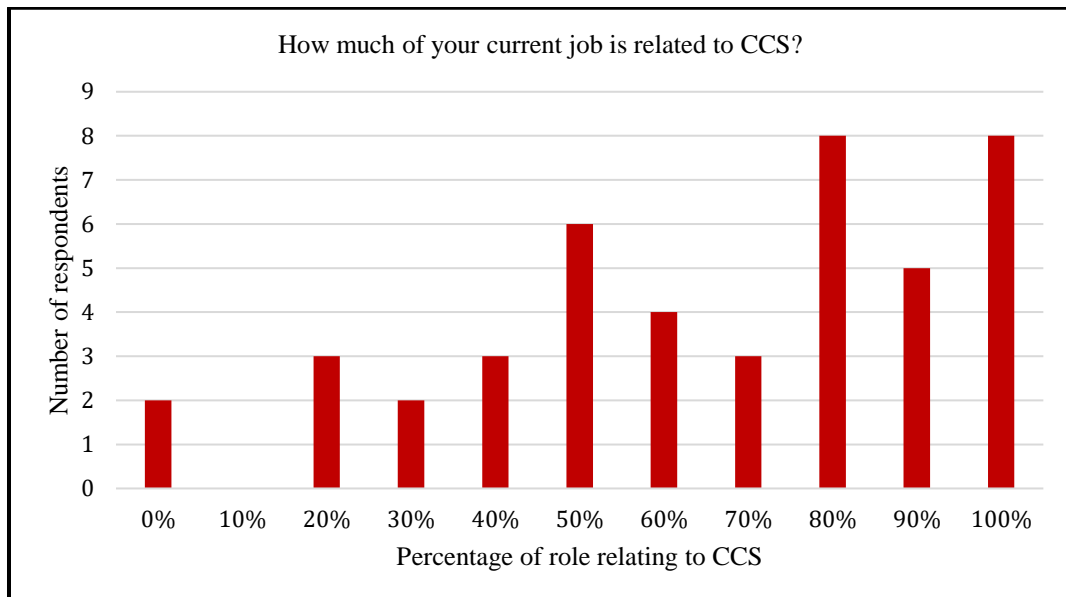


Figure 2 shows the % of respondent's work relating to CCS

3.5 Which UKCCSRC Funding opportunities were accessed?

Survey respondents were asked which of the UKCCSRC funding opportunities they accessed when they were an ECR. The most accessed funding opportunity was the Meeting Fund which 28 (68%) of the respondents had accessed, followed by the Flexible Funding which was accessed by 13 (32%) ECRs. The meeting fund being the most accessed award is not surprising as over 200 meeting fund awards, with a total award value of over £15k, have been made since 2022 (inclusive). Figure 3 (below) outlines the UKCCSRC ECR funding opportunities accessed by survey respondents.

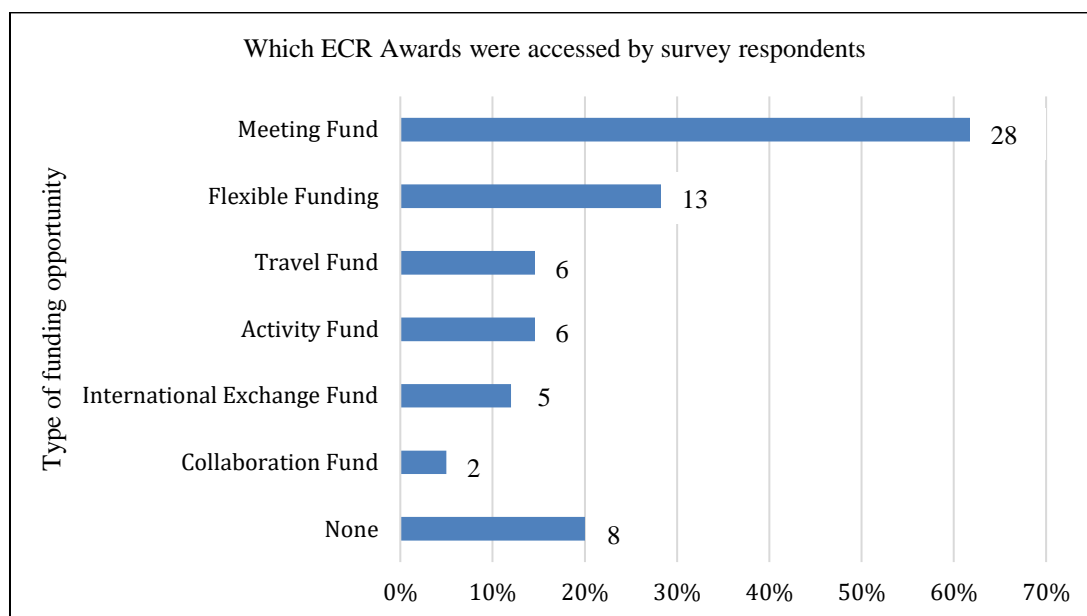


Figure 3 shows the percentage of survey respondents that accessed the different UKCCSRC funding opportunities while an ECR

3.6 What events did ECR Alumni engage with?

The most common theme identified through qualitative (open ended) responses was networking (Table 1, Theme 1). Furthermore, the UKCCSRC events programme, including the conferences and webinars, enabled those no longer working in CCS to remain engaged with the community and technology developments. Interestingly, particularly given the value that respondents place on networking opportunities provided by UKCCSRC, three ECR Alumni respondents did not engage with any events while an ECR.

The type of UKCCSRC events attended by survey respondents are shown in Table 3. The majority 36 (88%) of respondents had engaged with the UKCCSRC conferences, with many also engaging with webinars and Awaydays. We know from our registration records that ECRs most often attend the conferences and awaydays.

| Is the respondent still working in CCS | Which UKCCSRC organised events had been attended as an ECR | | | |
|--|--|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| | Conferences | Webinars | Awaydays | None |
| Yes | 29 | 21 | 18 | 3 |
| No | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Other | 3 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 36 (88%) | 25 (61%) | 21 (51%) | 3 (7%) |

Table 3 shows which UKCCSRC events respondent's engaged with while an ECR, with responses displayed according to whether the respondent still works in CCS

3.7 What has the UKCCSRC ECR Programme done well?

From the alumni survey, it was clear that engagement with the UKCCSRC community was maintained even when ECRs left the CCS field. There was a direct correlation between the UKCCSRC networking opportunities that were accessed and future collaborations and employment within the industry - ECRs themselves recognised that the networking opportunities offered by the UKCCSRC had enhanced their career paths. ECRs also recognise that the

skills development opportunities offered by the UKCCSRC supported their future careers (Theme 6, Table 1). The meeting fund was well utilised across all demographic groups, suggesting that this fund is a key enabler for ECR engagement.

Example quotes from ECR Alumni respondents to illustrate this theme include:

- *'Thanks to my involvement in UKCCSRC, I could continue with my development to specialise in CO₂ storage. Without this support, it would have been a lot harder.'*
- *'Support in creating collaboration with other researchers thus help in sharing of knowledge and development of new ideas.'*
- *'UKCCSRC has helped in developing a broader understanding of the CCS sector and its role in decarbonising the UK economy and in knowing/meeting the key stakeholders in the sector.'*

3.8 What challenges were raised?

Some of the challenges raised during the alumni survey included a lack of awareness about the opportunities offered, the competitiveness of funding opportunities and how the scarcity of these can limit opportunities for ECRs to progress into CCS-focused careers. Respondents also noted that training sessions on more general CCS knowledge would have been helpful at the beginning of their careers as well as additional opportunities for oral presentation of their work.

Example quotes from ECR Alumni respondents to illustrate this theme include:

- *'I did not know of any other ways [that UKCCSRC could support me] at the time'*
- *'When I first started my PhD, it would have been good to have 101 training sessions on general CCUS things, or more specific things like specific H₂ production processes which I think are shared across many ECR members.'*
- *'I had applied for the flexible fund but my application was rejected and [subsequently I was] forced to leave the field'*
- *'UKCCSRC did not give me opportunities to present my work to other people. I don't think this was really an open opportunity until the webinars / the KE conferences came along. I would have really benefitted from being able to share my work through oral presentation.'*

Many of the challenges raised by ECR alumni survey respondents have already been taken forward by the UKCCSRC and now incorporated into the UKCCSRC ECR programme. For example:

- The Knowledge Exchange Conference was established in 2022 in response to a desire for more opportunities to share research through oral presentation. The KE conference has an open call for abstracts and ECRs are actively encouraged to submit.
- ECRs are able to attend the UKCCSRC-hosted CCS Training Course for free. This was in response to ECRs having a desire for CCS learnings outside of their immediate research area and address knowledge gaps.
- There is now a dedicated monthly ECR bulletin highlighting relevant opportunities for target communication on ECR programme and wider offerings. This was established in response to direct feedback received at an AwayDay where ECRs advised they often missed ECR opportunities highlighted within the UKCCSRC monthly newsletter.

4. Key Learnings and Conclusions

Key learnings and conclusions from the UKCCSRC ECR programme and alumni survey include:

- Research Centres and Institutions have an important role to play in enabling a thriving and varied ECR programme, providing opportunities that are inclusive and support a broad range of career development skills. Of particular value to our ECR respondents was the networking opportunities, funding and skills development.
- The number of ECR funding awards made, and the number of different institutions that have accessed UKCCSRC ECR funding demonstrate that there is a sustained demand for and interest in the full range of funding opportunities that UKCCSRC offer, and have been offered, for over a decade.
- UKCCSRC ECR Alumni are employed within the emerging CCS sector in the UK and internationally. Those who engage with the ECR programme feel it brings a range of benefits, including contextual knowledge, applied experience and transferable skills that they will then bring to the CCS sector. i.e. the UKCCSRC ECR programme is developing employees across research and industry.
- Research Centres can provide a way for those no longer working in the discipline to remain connected and potentially return to working in that sector in the future. This will have been particularly important for CCS in the UK context where funding and development has been stop-start. The value of this is also reflected in the fact that two of the four respondents who are no longer working in CCS were still engaged with UKCCSRC.
- The Conference programme has proven particularly valuable to our ECR community. 85% of ECR Alumni respondents who still work in CCS had attended conferences, and all of those who no longer work in CCS had attended conferences. Importantly, conference attendance was high across all demographics (Table 3).

Feedback indicates that the UKCCSRC are doing the right things to support capacity building in CCS; recent additions to the programme had already responded to the needs requested by the ECR community, and raised as issues by ECR Alumni which may not have had the opportunity to benefit from these additions.

Lessons to take forward from the UKCCSRC ECR programme experience include

- Offer a broad range of opportunities for ECRs to engage with
 - The UKCCSRC ECR Meeting Fund was the most accessed, with 68% of survey participants stating that they were involved in that funding opportunity
 - Flexible Funds were accessed by 36% of those still working in CCS (25% of those no longer working in CCS)
 - UKCCSRC funding has supported, and continues to support, ECRs to build their skills and networks
- Listen to what the ECR community would like in order to build an engaged community and to meet the needs of the ECR community that are additional to what their institution provides.
- Don't underplay the importance of networking opportunities to share and connect, including outside of their discipline to provide a whole system overview, UKCCSRC conferences and webinars kept people engaged with CCS, even when they were not currently working in the area and provided a forum for ECRs to engage and share with the community

Yes, CCS, as it's an emerging technology, is different; many of the roles within CCS do not yet exist and the career pathways for these are not well established. As such, Specialised ECR programmes, as part of the mission of CCS Research Centres, can play a key role in building community and supporting a joined-up oversight for ECRs at a formative stage in their career development as part of the essential sector capacity building for this new industry.

5. Acknowledgments

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6. References

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- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/early-career-researchers/>
- ^{iv} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/early-career-researchers/ecr-away-days/>
- ^v <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/early-career-researchers/ecr-funding/>
- ^{vi} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/ecr-meeting-fund/>
- ^{vii} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/research/flexible-funding/>
- ^{viii} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/ecr-collaboration-fund/>
- ^{ix} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/ecr-activity-fund/>
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- ^{xiii} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/early-career-researchers/ecr-working-group/>
- ^{xiv} <https://ukccsrc.ac.uk/knowledge-exchange-conference-sheffield-5-6-november-2024/>
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Appendix 1
Questions asked in survey

1. Job role/title
(short answer required)
2. What type of organisation do you work for?
(Multiple choice answer)
 - Charity
 - Government
 - Higher Education
 - Industry
 - NGO
 - Regulator
 - Other (please specify)
3. What is the name of your organisation (optional)?
(short answer)
4. Do you still work In Carbon Capture and Storage?
Multiple choice answer
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other (please specify)
5. How much of your current job is related to Carbon Capture and Storage?
(Likert scale 0-10)
6. Please provide a brief description of your job / the sector that you work in now
(Long text answer)
7. What type of organisation/s have you worked in prior to your current role (please select all that apply)
(Multiple choice answer)
 - Charity
 - Government
 - Higher Education
 - Industry
 - NGO
 - Regulator
 - N/A
 - Other (please specify)
8. Were any of your previous roles connected to CCS?
(Multiple choice answer)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not applicable (no previous roles)
 - Other (please specify)
9. Please provide more information about your previous roles, if you are happy to.
(long text answer)

-
10. Are you still engaged with the UKCCSRC community?
(Multiple choice answer)
- Yes
 - No
 - Other (please specify)
11. Which institution(s) were you based at when you were an ECR?
(short answer required)
12. From:
2005-2024
13. To:
2005-2024
14. As an ECR, were you involved in any of the following UKCCSRC funding opportunities
(please select all that apply)?
- UKCCSRC ECR Meeting Fund - (travel to UKCCSRC conferences/Awaydays etc.)
 - UKCCSRC ECR International Exchange Fund
 - UKCCSRC ECR Activity Fund
 - UKCCSRC ECR Collaboration Fund
 - UKCCSRC Flexible Funding
 - UKCCSRC ECR Travel Fund (GHGT & IEAGHG Summer School)
 - None
 - Yes, not sure which (and grant permission for UKCCSRC to use the name provided to search previous awardees)
 - Other
15. As an ECR, did you attend any of the following UKCCSRC events (please select all that apply)?
- UKCCSRC Conferences
 - UKCCSRC ECR Awaydays
 - UKCCSRC Webinars
 - None
 - Other
16. Were you involved in any of the UKCCSRC ECR opportunities below (please select all that apply)?
- UKCCSRC ECR Working Group / Coordination Group
 - ECR Poster presentation
 - Webinar presentation/chair
 - ECR CCS Communication Competition
 - TERC/PACT Training days
 - ECR Winter School – EPSRC CDT in Resilient Decarbonised Fuel Energy Systems
 - None
 - Other
17. In what ways has the UKCCSRC supported or enabled you on your career path, and/or to get to where you are today?
(Long text answer)
18. When you were an ECR, were there any other ways the UKCCSRC supported you?
(Long text answer)