



# Understanding researchers' experiences of non success in academia and identifying recommendations to better support research careers in higher education

*Looking beneath the surface of academic success*

Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Bernstein, C.J., Passi, D., Thomas, N., Haywood, K.L., Boardman, F., MacArtney, J.I.

Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

## ABOVE THE SURFACE:

Visible markers of academic success

Publications

Grants

Fellowships

Promotions

Achievements

## BENEATH THE SURFACE:

Hidden experiences of non success

Rejection

Uncertainty

Precarity

Stalled progression

Self doubt

Non success is a normal and systemic part of academic life, yet it is often invisible.

## 1 Background and Rationale

- "Failure" in academic research is an inevitable and normal part of the process, but it is often **stigmatised** and linked to individual inadequacy.<sup>1</sup>
- There is sparse policy guidance on how higher education institutions and senior academics can **normalise** and **depersonalise** "failure."
- Our previous systematic scoping review on navigating "failure" in academia identified **41 recommendations** by:
  - **Timeframe for implementation:** short-, medium- and long term.
  - **Level of responsibility:** individual researcher, research group, etc.
- What was also needed were **researcher experiences** to refine and strengthen the framework.

## 2 Aims

- Understand how researchers experience and navigate "failure" in academia.
- Use lived experience to review and refine recommendations for supporting research careers.

## 5 Conclusions and implications

- Researchers across different career stages and disciplines described "failure" as a **common** but **hidden experience** in higher education.
- They felt that senior managers and the wider higher education sector should support **well-being, career development** and a **"safe-to-fail"** research environment.
- Action is, thus, needed to create **equitable, inclusive** and **sustainable** research cultures for those with a research role in academia:

## 3 What We Did

### Data collection

- In-depth remote **interviews** with **30 researchers** across different disciplinary and career backgrounds from 17 UK higher education institutions.
- We explored **experiences of "failure", support and structural challenges**.

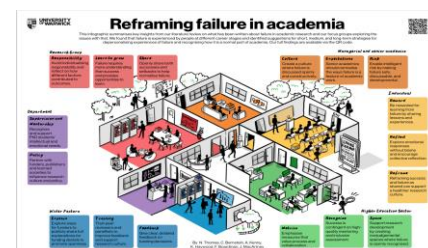
### Analysis

- **Deductively coded** participants' accounts to the recommendations identified from the scoping review.
- We report their perspectives across the **six** different levels of the recommendations framework.

## 4 What We Found

- **Late-career research academics** should openly share their setbacks to **normalise** "failure" for early-career researchers.
- **Research groups** should discuss "failure" in **nonjudgemental and inclusive spaces**.
- **Senior managers** should receive **training** on how to discuss non-success to be more compassionate and prepare early-career researchers for "failure."
- **Departments** should provide researchers with **equitable access** to support and mentorship schemes.
- **The higher education sector** needs to create a **supportive** and **"failure-tolerant"** research culture by addressing narrow success metrics, precarity and workload pressures.
- **Funders and publishers** should communicate decisions **transparently**.

*"There isn't an institutional culture [in higher education] that is supportive towards "failure." (P005, female, Early Career Researcher)*



### Reference:

<sup>1</sup> Davies T, Disney T, Harrowell E. Reclaiming failure in geography: Academic honesty in a neoliberal world. *Emotion, Space and Society*. 2021 Feb 1;38:100769.

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Scan for further information on our "Safe to Fail" webpage

