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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# REVISED We work, but we don't decide: Exploring early career researchers' leadership in university decision-making

[version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 not approved]

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**v2** **First published:** 10 Jul 2026, **6**:242
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24339.1
**Latest published:** 21 Sep 2026, **6**:242
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24339.2

## Abstract

While the importance of inclusive decision-making is widely acknowledged, the specific conditions shaping Early Career Researchers' (ECRs) involvement in institutional governance remain underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the current state of ECR participation, the factors that facilitate or obstruct their engagement, and the role of integrating ECR voices into university decision-making as a means of driving institutional change. This case study, conducted as part of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action (CA20137) VOICES, explores whether and how ECRs are involved in decision-making at a university in western Anatolia, Türkiye. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with ten participants, eight ECRs and two academics holding admin roles, this research captures lived experiences of ECRs from both Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and social science and humanities. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online. The data were analysed using content analysis. The findings suggest that, although ECRs provide valuable critical perspectives, their influence on institutional decision-making remains limited and institutional hierarchies often constrain ECRs' participation in governance. This study calls for formal mechanisms to enhance ECR representation and voice in decision making, advocating for more inclusive, transparent, and equitable governance in Turkish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Broader recognition of ECRs' contributions is essential to support their development as both scholars and future academic leaders.

## Keywords

Early Career Researchers (ECRs), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Governance, Decision-Making, Inclusivity.

**Open Peer Review**

**Approval Status** ✗ ✓

| | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|
| **version 2** (revision) 21 Sep 2026 | | ✓ view |
| **version 1** 10 Jul 2026 | ✗ view | ✓ view |

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**Author roles: Baysan S**: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Külcür R**: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing

**Competing interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Grant information:** This project has received funding from the European Union's Framework Programme for Research & Innovation as part of the COST Action [CA20137 Making Young Researchers' Voices Heard for Gender Equality ], as supported by the COST Association (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).
*The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.*

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**How to cite this article:** Baysan S and Külcür R. **We work, but we don't decide: Exploring early career researchers' leadership in university decision-making [version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 not approved]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:242 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24339.2

**First published:** 10 Jul 2026, **6**:242 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24339.1

**REVISED** **Amendments from Version 1**

We thank the reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions, which have helped us to improve the clarity and overall quality of the manuscript. We have carefully considered all comments and revised the manuscript accordingly. In particular, we have provided further information on the institutional context of the study, including the relevant features of the Turkish higher education system and the institutional setting in which the research was undertaken. We have also clarified how Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are understood in this study and explained the rationale for adopting this definition.

We have revised the methodology section to provide greater detail on the research design, participant selection, data collection and ethical considerations. We have clarified the rationale for selecting the participants and provided additional information about their characteristics, while ensuring that their identities remain protected. We have also made clearer how the research questions informed the interview questions and the subsequent analysis.

In response to the reviewers' comments, we have further elaborated on the data analysis. The revised manuscript provides a clearer account of how the data were coded and how initial codes were reviewed, grouped and developed into broader themes. We have also clarified the main themes addressed in the analysis. These include participants' perceptions of what constitutes an ECR, the nature and scope of work undertaken by ECRs, their roles in institutional decision-making, the issues on which they have a voice, and their views on how ECR voices could be better heard and represented.

We have also made revisions throughout the manuscript to improve clarity, consistency and coherence. We believe that the changes made in response to the reviewers' comments have strengthened the contextualisation of the study, increased transparency regarding the research process and provided a clearer account of how the findings were developed.

**Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article**

## Introduction

The research workforce in Europe has expanded considerably in recent years, with the number of researchers increasing by approximately 45% between 2012 and 2022 and doctoral enrolment also showing an overall upward trend (European Commission, 2023). There is a similar trend in Türkiye (YÖK, 2026; Gokalp, 2023). This expansion has increased the importance of understanding the experiences and participation of researchers at different career stages, including those at the early stages of their careers. However, despite their increasing presence and essential contributions to research and teaching, the involvement of ECRs in institutional decision-making remains marginalised compared to that of more senior academic staff (De Boer et al., 2007; Brami et al., 2023). While recent reforms in university governance and European Union policies, including funding schemes such as EU COST Actions and initiatives like VOICES (CA20137)[1], have sought to promote inclusion and equity in academia, limited attention has been given to the participation and representation of ECRs in governance, particularly across diverse institutional contexts.

The representation of ECRs in university governance is important because decision-making structures should reflect the perspectives of different career stages within the academic community. University governance has traditionally been dominated by senior academics, while ECRs often occupy more junior and less secure positions and experience particular challenges related to career progression, access to resources, research opportunities, workload and participation in institutional decision-making (Leišytė et al., 2026a). These experiences can provide perspectives that may be less visible in governance structures dominated by senior academics, making ECR participation relevant not only for their own working conditions but also for more inclusive and responsive institutional decision-making. Recent comparative research across Europe confirms that ECR representation in university and faculty-level decision-making bodies remains limited, although their voices may be heard through informal channels (Leišytė et al., 2026a, 2026b). This suggests that, despite their significant contribution to research and the future sustainability of academic institutions, ECRs remain insufficiently represented in formal governance structures, highlighting the need to examine how their voices can be more meaningfully incorporated into university decision-making.

This paper, framed by two key concepts, participation and representation, examines the current position of ECRs in institutional decision-making at a Western Anatolian university in Türkiye. It pays particular attention to the ways in which ECRs are represented and the extent to which their voices are incorporated into governance processes. As a case study from an Inclusiveness Target Country (ITC) within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), this research offers a situated perspective on academic governance and inclusion. In doing so, it responds to the importance of recognising the complex national contexts that underpin system and institutional reforms, and the need to better

[1] https://gendervoices.eu/

understand the nuanced relationship between decision-making processes and academics' lived experiences and perceptions (Jones et al., 2025).

In this context, our research explores how ECRs navigate their roles within the academic hierarchy and contribute, explicitly or implicitly, to institutional decision-making processes. By focusing on one Turkish public university, the study also responds to calls for more geographically diverse case studies that illuminate the variability of governance practices across different national and institutional settings (Teichler, 2015; European Commission, 2020). The study was guided by five interrelated research questions, aiming to understand how ECRs experience participation and representation in higher education governance, as well as to identify the organisational transformations needed to support their more meaningful inclusion.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework, followed by the institutional context and the methodology adopted in the study. The paper then proceeds with the presentation and analysis of the data and findings.

## Theoretical framework

This study is conceptually based on two interrelated concepts: participation and representation. Participation refers to the degree to which individuals can engage meaningfully in institutional decision-making processes, not merely through formal inclusion but through having genuine influence over outcomes that affect them (Arnstein, 1969). Thus, conceptualising participation as a function of power and distinguishing between non-participation and tokenism is important. This framework was adapted to institutional settings, demonstrating that formal participatory mechanisms often coexist with limited substantive influence (Quick & Feldman, 2011; Varwell, 2022).

Representation, on the other hand concerns the extent to which the interests, perspectives and concerns of a particular group are reflected within governance structures and decision-making arenas. Representation is understood here primarily as whether those involved in institutional processes effectively advance the interests of the groups they are expected to represent (Pitkin, 1967). Within the higher education context, this viewpoint highlights the distinction between presence and actual influence in governance structures.

Previous research on HEI governance often highlights the dominance of senior academics in decision-making processes, with hierarchical cultures limiting opportunities for junior colleagues to influence strategic agendas (Kehm, 2006; De Boer et al., 2007; Brami et al., 2023); how ECRs often occupy marginal positions within decision-making processes, shaped by precarity, short-term contracts, and strong career incentives that prioritise research productivity over governance engagement (Külcür et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2025). Yet ECRs are increasingly performing vital academic and administrative work, frequently occupying ambiguous or "in-between" roles, neither fully students nor fully established academics (Laudel & Gläser, 2008; Leišytė et al., 2026a). Their responsibilities often extend beyond research and teaching into coordination and committee work, albeit informally and with limited recognition where they achieve descriptive or symbolic representation, their capacity for substantive representation remains limited, reflecting broader structural inequalities within the academic profession (Menard, 2025; Fisher & James, 2022).

This study aims to explore ECRs' perceptions and experiences, as well as their roles in institutional governance and leadership. Thus, this framework provides an important lens through which to analyse how participation and representation intersect in shaping power, inclusion, and decision-making within contemporary university governance, particularly with regard to the constrained yet evolving role of early-career academics.

## Empirical insights from western Anatolia: Institutional context

The case university, situated in Western Anatolia, Türkiye, is a mid-sized public higher education institution founded in 1992. It functions as a regional higher education hub and features a large and complex academic structure, providing a broad range of under and postgraduate programs, and comprising 20 faculties, three institutes, two graduate schools, one conservatory, 19 vocational schools, and 32 research centres. Decision-making processes within the university remain highly centralised and follow traditional academic hierarchies. Although vocational schools operate under university oversight, they maintain a semi-autonomous character and are often predominantly staffed by CRs, as it is challenging to attract senior academics to remote or rural areas.

The university's research culture is oriented toward applied sciences, agriculture, veterinary medicine, health, and teacher education, with ECRs playing an essential role in teaching, supporting research projects, and contributing to academic outputs. Nevertheless, formal institutional mechanisms that support ECR-led research initiatives are notably limited as was found by this research.

This context, therefore, provides critical background for understanding the governance experiences of ECRs at the university. The centralised and hierarchical character of the institution reflects broader patterns within Turkish higher education governance, where young academics often face structural and cultural barriers in contributing to institutional leadership and change. The experiences of ECRs need to be understood within the broader institutional and cultural context of the Turkish higher education system. Higher education in Türkiye is relatively centralised, with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) playing an important role in regulating academic appointments, staffing and career progression. Although some ECRs hold permanent positions, research assistantships can involve fixed-term contracts, with contracts in some cases renewed every two years. Moreover, opportunities for ECRs to progress to permanent academic positions remain limited, creating competition for available posts and uncertainty around longer-term career development. These structural conditions are also shaped by hierarchical academic cultures, in which seniority, institutional relationships and established academic networks may influence opportunities for progression. Thus, ECR experiences of career development and insecurity should not be viewed solely as individual challenges but as situated within the wider institutional, cultural and structural conditions of academic work in Türkiye.

There is no nationally standardised definition of an ECR in Türkiye. As this study was conducted within the framework of the EU COST Action, we therefore adopted the broader understanding of ECR used by the European Commission. In this study, ECR refers to researchers who are at an early stage of their research careers, during or following their PhD, and who are actively engaged in research. The term is used to describe a stage of career development rather than a specific occupational or contractual status.

## Methodology

This research was carried out as a part of a qualitative case study within the framework of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action project *VOICES*[2] (Working Group 2), focusing on country comparisons in inclusive governance in European HEIs. The university was selected primarily because one of the authors is affiliated with the institution, providing an appropriate institutional context for conducting the study. Within the university, academic staff from the Faculty of Education were purposively selected, with a particular focus on ECRs whose experiences were directly relevant to the research questions. The number of ECRs within the Faculty was limited; therefore, participants were selected across different departments to ensure that the sample represented ECRs from the range of disciplinary contexts within the Faculty.

A case study approach was adopted to facilitate a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of ECRs within a specific institutional context (Yin, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This design was particularly well suited to uncovering the nuanced ways in which ECRs participate in, or are excluded from, governance structures at a mid-sized public university in Türkiye, alongside HEIs across Europe that are part of the WG2 comparison study (Leišytė et al. 2026a).

### Participants and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten participants, comprising eight ECRs and two managers. The ECR group comprised four ECRs with experience in institutional university governance bodies, including committees and four without such experience, one of whom was an externally affiliated PhD researcher. The sample was purposively selected to reflect diversity across disciplines, ranging from STEM fields to the social sciences and humanities (Table 1), and

**Table 1. Disciplinary distribution of the sample population.**

| Field | Male | Female | Age range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social Studies Education | 3 | – | 25–44 |
| Mathematics Education | 2 | 1 | 25–44 |
| Science Education | - | 1 | 35–44 |
| Preschool Education | – | 1 | 35–44 |
| Computer Education & IT Technologies | - | 1 | 25–44 |
| Guidance & Psychological Counselling | 1 | - | 35–44 |
| **Total** | **6** | **4** | |

[2]https://gendervoices.eu/

across career stages, while ensuring gender and age balance with the exception of two male managers (a vice-dean and a senior academic administrator) which reflects gender imbalance in administrative duties.

The sample population consisted of an equal number of male and female ECRs (four of each gender) and two male administrators. The ECRs were evenly distributed between the 25–34 and 35–44 age groups. The managers were between 35–44. The two managers included a Professor and an Associate Professor, both with direct administrative responsibilities. Among the ECRs were two PhD candidates (one external), three research assistants, three early-career academic staff (Dr. Lecturers and Dr. Academicians), each at different stages of the academic ladder, but typically considered within the ECR category (Laudel & Gläser, 2008; European Commission, 2023).

Interviews were carried out face-to-face or online between 13 June and 27 November 2023, with each lasting approximately one hour. Informed consent was received from all participants, and the data were handled and stored in line with established ethical research standards. The interview protocol and reporting sheet developed by the COST Action VOICES WG2 were employed to guide the interviews and ensure coherence across cases.

### Data analysis

Following ethical procedures interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised for confidentiality. Thematic content analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and insights related to the five core research questions mentioned earlier (familiarisation with the data, creating codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining them, and then defining and analysing the collected data) (Neuendorf, 2018). Initial coding was performed manually, and emergent themes were reviewed iteratively to capture both convergences and divergences across participant groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers, who coded the data and subsequently compared and discussed their coding to identify areas of agreement and disagreement and to reach a consensus. In line with the deductive approach adopted for the COST project, the initial coding framework and thematic categories were informed by the project's established conceptual framework. The emerging themes were then reviewed by the two researchers and checked against the interview data to ensure that they were adequately supported by participants' accounts and consistently applied across the dataset. Any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved through agreement between the researchers. Thematic categories were then synthesised and cross comparisons were made between eight ECRs and two managers' perspectives. The themes explored participants' perceptions of the definition of ECRs, the work undertaken by ECRs, their roles in institutional decision-making, the issues on which they have a voice, and their perspectives on how ECR voices could be better heard and represented. Simultaneously, all decisions related to themes, interpretations, and theoretical contexts were reviewed by the authors, ensuring both transparency and academic integrity.

## Findings and reflections

The study explored the perceptions, experiences, and roles of ECRs in institutional governance and leadership across five core areas:

(1) the definition and perception of who qualifies as an ECR,

(2) the nature and scope of work undertaken by ECRs,

(3) the extent to which their voices are heard in academic decision-making,

(4) the specific domains in which they have influence or a say, and

(5) the barriers and opportunities that shape their formal and informal participation and their suggestions for improvement.

The following section presents detailed findings for each of the five research themes.

### Who is an ECR?

Participants shared a common understanding of ECRs as individuals who are post-PhD that are not yet fully tenured or autonomous. The notion of instability, particularly contractual insecurity due to yearly contract renewals and limited decision-making power, emerged as central to ECR status. This aligns with earlier studies that conceptualise ECRs as occupying a liminal position within university structures between doctoral training and academic independence (Laudel & Gläser, 2008; Wróblewska et al., 2024).

All participants agreed that being an ECR is less about the number of years since earning a doctorate and more about institutional position and autonomy. For example, ECR1 said: *"You are an ECR after your PhD and before you reach a certain autonomy in research and teaching"* highlighting how role-based authority influences self-identification. Similarly, ECR5 noted: *"I still feel like an early career because I am not secure, not independent"* reflecting the affective dimension of precarity.

Interestingly, some participants with more than a decade in academia still identified themselves as ECRs, due to limited institutional agency. As ECR8 stated: *"Although I have been in academia for 14 years, I think I am still an ECR"*. These views challenge rigid career-stage definitions based on linear trajectories and support literature suggesting that ECR identity is often prolonged under structural constraints (Bennion & Locke, 2010).

Regarding job titles, participants variously classified PhD students, postdocs, research assistants, Dr. lecturers, and assistant professors under the ECR umbrella. This expanded view resonates with broader European debates on the heterogeneous nature of ECR status (European Commission, 2023), particularly specially in contexts where career structures and employment conditions are not clearly defined (Guth & Gill, 2008). For instance, ECR2 observed: *"ECRs are researchers before obtaining PhD/doing PhD and assistant professors* [having a PhD] *nowadays called Dr academician"*. Others like ECR1 offered a narrower definition: *"Research assistants who get paid and researchers who are at the MSc level are ECRs"*.

Both interviewed managers articulated broad definitions of ECRs, seeing them as spanning from doctoral students to those not yet promoted to associate professorship. Manager1 stated: *"PhD* [candidates], *but researchers are ECRs until they get their position as associate professors, as they are more stable in terms of contract, too"*. Manager2 similarly described ECRs as *"the lowest level of academicians … including PhD candidates, postdocs, Dr lecturers"*. This perspective reinforces a view of ECRs as functionally defined by institutional precarity and lack of full academic status.

While consistent with the European Commission's (2023) framing of ECRs as those researchers within the first 4–7 years of their research career (full-time equivalent) after completing their PhD and not yet fully independent. This broader definition highlights how national and institutional contexts still shape ECR identity (Kwiek, 2019). In Türkiye, there is also no agreed definition of ECR (Gustafsson, 2022), where national bodies such as Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK) shape promotion criteria and institutional support for ECRs remains limited, this definitional ambiguity becomes particularly pronounced. Moreover, these findings echo broader concerns in the literature that the ECR category remains under-defined and context-dependent across countries and disciplines (Acker & Webber, 2017).

This variability can affect resource allocation, mentorship access, and eligibility for funding or leadership development initiatives. Therefore, the evidence suggests that ECR status is experienced as both an institutional label and a personal-professional identity shaped by autonomy, contractual conditions, and recognition. In line with Laudel and Gläser's (2008) observations, many participants' accounts indicate that ECR is not a fixed phase but a fluid, extended, and often ambiguous career stage. Thus, this definitional ambiguity presents challenges for institutional governance and policy-making, particularly in recognising and addressing ECR-specific needs. Therefore, without clear recognition, ECRs may fall through the cracks of institutional support and representation structures, further reinforcing their marginal status in academia (Breeze & Taylor, 2020).

As the data show, while definitions may be inclusive, they are not always accompanied by supportive mechanisms. Hence, the need for formal institutional recognition of ECR status, aligned with representation, resources, and progression opportunities, remains a critical concern for higher education governance.

### Work undertaken by ECRs: Leadership through necessity, not strategy

The data clearly show that ECRs in this case study carry a disproportionate workload composed of teaching, administrative support, and research obligations, often without appropriate mentorship, autonomy, or institutional recognition. Their role is frequently defined by expectations to fulfil multifaceted tasks rather than being supported in professional development or research advancement. These findings align with the broader literature, which highlights the precarity and multitasking burdens that characterise ECR experiences globally (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007; Shin et al., 2014; Külcür et al., 2026).

All eight ECR participants reported a heavy and unbalanced teaching workload. While their formal teaching hours varied, preparation time, grading, and student consultations significantly increased their weekly load. As ECR8 remarked, *"I teach 10 hours per week but spend most of my time preparing. I am never finished"*. This reflects the findings of

Houston et al. (2006) as well as Külcür et al. (2024), who also noted that ECRs often must learn through doing, without guidance or reduced teaching load, limiting their ability to develop a research trajectory: ECR6 explained: *"I was given lots of teaching with no mentoring or support"*.

Administrative responsibilities add another layer of burden. For example, ECR4 stated: *"We are expected to publish, teach, supervise, do administrative work, all at once"*. These accounts align with the concept of "academic all-rounders," in which ECRs are expected to contribute across teaching, research, and service, often with little regard for capacity or sustainability (Winter, 2009). Moreover, some participants also reported that additional duties, such as preparing graduation ceremonies, managing websites, or contributing to institutional visibility on social media, are typically assigned without consultation or negotiation (ECR1, ECR6). These tasks are seen as administrative and carry limited academic merit in terms of career progression. The lack of role clarity and formal recognition for such responsibilities reinforces structural inequities and compounds the challenge of building an academic identity (Bennion & Locke, 2010).

Participants also consistently reported limited research autonomy and support. While institutional expectations for publication are high, ECRs reported minimal time, resources, or mentorship to engage meaningfully in research. Some expressed feelings of isolation, while a few, such as ECR2 and ECR8, cited engagement in EU projects and international collaborations as exceptions. However, such opportunities were not widespread and appeared dependent on external networks rather than institutional support. This aligns with the findings of Leišytė et al. (2026a) who emphasise that managerialist university structures often fail to nurture the research capacity of junior staff, particularly in non-elite institutions. Without systemic mentoring schemes, ECRs face a steep learning curve, risking stagnation or attrition from academia (Martin et al., 2023).

A notable deviation emerged, whereby some ECRs held leadership roles at the case university, such as vice-dean or departmental coordinator positions, particularly in vocational schools. However, these appointments were not based on recognised leadership potential but were instead driven by institutional staff shortages, as reported by the senior administrator. Thus, leadership often seem to emerge out of necessity rather than as a strategic choice. While some ECRs welcomed these opportunities, they also highlighted that such roles came with limited decision-making power and further increased workload. As such, ECRs' leadership tends to be reactive and informal, aligning with the idea of "accidental leadership" (Delves, n.d.; Khwaja et al., 2022) often cited in early-career academic trajectories.

Both interviewed managers supported the view that ECRs primarily serve in support roles. For example, Manager1 stated that ECRs "*support teaching, exam supervision, paperwork*", and "*do some academic work*". Manager2 also confirmed this sentiment by noting they "*mostly support teaching and help administratively, but are not involved in core decisions*". These perspectives underscore the instrumental perception of ECRs as individuals who carry operational tasks while lacking strategic agency within their institutions (Henkel, 2005). Importantly, Manager1 also reflected on the subservience of ECRs: *"ECRs are preferred by some academics in leadership because they tend to comply more easily. Due to pressure for academic progression, many ECRs feel they cannot afford to refuse these assignments"*. This aligns with research indicating that ECRs often feel compelled to overextend themselves in the hope of securing long-term academic positions (Laudel & Gläser, 2008). The imbalance of power, exacerbated by unclear promotion pathways and informal institutional cultures, creates an environment where ECRs are overburdened, under-recognised, and structurally silenced.

### To what extent is their voice heard?

A core theme emerging from the interviews with ECRs was the discrepancy between *being invited to speak* and *being meaningfully heard.* While formal structures occasionally offer ECRs the opportunity to express opinions, their input often lacks consequence, impact, or follow-up. Participants repeatedly described scenarios where speaking out did not translate into influence. As ECR5 stated succinctly: *"You can say something, but the decisions are already made"*. This sentiment captures the disillusionment that many ECRs feel invited into processes that are symbolic rather than substantive.

ECRs' formal participation in university governance, such as departmental or faculty meetings, tends to be passive or peripheral; therefore, they seem to have a symbolic inclusion with limited impact. Several respondents (e.g., ECR4, ECR6, ECR8) reported that even when they attend such meetings, their opinions are not integrated into final decisions. This distinction between *invitation* and *influence* aligns with previous research, which shows that junior academics are often included in tokenistic ways within decision-making bodies (Musselin, 2013). Such practices may satisfy procedural norms but do little to challenge hierarchical power dynamics.

Moreover, ECR4 stated: *"Research assistants do not have any roles in decision-making. They do not have any representatives to influence decision-making either. Unions can play a role in involving ECRs in decision-making,*

*but I don't think there is such an agenda in the unions now"*. This highlights not only the absence of formal representation structures for ECRs but also points to missed opportunities for collective advocacy. This finding mirrors Henkel's (2005) observation that ECRs are caught in institutional structures that neither acknowledge their agency nor provide mechanisms for their inclusion. The idea of being structurally side-lined was echoed by ECR6, who also noted: *"Even if you speak up, it doesn't change anything"*. As Leišytė (2011) argued, participation without influence undermines trust and contributes to feelings of futility among junior staff, especially in rigidly hierarchical systems.

While informal consultation was noted as more common, particularly about teaching, project work, or administrative duties, it rarely translates into influence or recognition. Managerial expectations of ECRs appear to rely on their compliance and work ethic, rather than their critical input. ECR8 reflected: *"I can express my opinion, but I am unsure if I am listened to"*. Similarly, ECR6 stated: *"Currently, I do not feel any type of impact on any specific topic"*. This aligns with theories of *symbolic participation* (Arnstein, 1969), where lower tiers of the academic workforce are involved primarily for appearances, while power remains concentrated among senior figures. Such dynamics are reinforced in settings where informal norms and hierarchical expectations shape the decision-making climate (De Boer et al., 2007).

Some ECRs (ECR3, ECR4, ECR6) acknowledged that being heard is often contingent upon personal networks, interpersonal dynamics, or the personality of the department head. This indicates that voice and visibility are highly dependent on interpersonal rather than structural enablers, reinforcing informal cultures of influence (Trowler, 2010). As ECR3 pointed out, *"We cannot say our opinions in our department unless a sensitive decision-maker asks us"*. Another participant (ECR7) described a form of internalised silence, stating: *"I do not feel like I am involved in any decision-making. I think it depends on the person in charge"*. This reflects a culture of self-censorship, which is common in hierarchical organisations where voicing dissent may risk career progression (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Adamska et al., 2022).

From a managerial perspective on hierarchy and voice, both managers interviewed also acknowledged that ECRs have low visibility and limited agency in governance. Manager1 noted that even *"ECRs' voices are not structurally supported",* because they are ECRs, while Manager2 elaborated: *"There is a hierarchy at the university, and a demand for this hierarchy. Even when you try to pass the responsibility to department heads, it doesn't always work"*.

This highlights the institutional inertia that prevents meaningful decentralisation of power and inclusion of junior voices in leadership. These managerial statements align with research on the persistence of vertical governance models in universities, especially in systems influenced by older bureaucratic traditions or national higher education councils (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). In such environments, efforts to foster participatory leadership often fail unless supported by structural reform and cultural change.

Overall, this finding reveals a key contradiction. ECRs are acknowledged as contributors to institutional operations but not recognised as legitimate actors in governance. Their labour is accepted, but their voice is marginalised. The case reinforces the argument that informal recognition cannot replace formal mechanisms of participation (Kehm & Teichler, 2013). Without representative structures, such as elected ECR committees, mentoring for leadership pathways, or designated voting rights in faculty boards, ECR engagement remains precarious and conditional. This finding, therefore, calls for a re-examination of participatory frameworks in higher education governance, particularly in contexts where hierarchy is culturally ingrained. Efforts to enhance inclusivity and diversity in academic leadership must move beyond rhetoric to implement tangible changes that empower ECRs to shape their institutions.

### On which issues do ECRs have a say?

This research question reveals a contrast between ECRs' day-to-day involvement in academic operations and their limited influence in strategic or institutional decision-making. Across interviews, ECRs consistently described their roles as confined to micro-level tasks, such as course logistics, technical committees, or operational assignments, while being excluded from decisions that shape the academic direction of their departments or institutions. As ECR6 observed, *"We are not included in curriculum design or hiring decisions",* and ECR8 noted, *"I am in the First Aid and Horizontal Transition Committees, but never in academic decision-making"*. These remarks point to a pattern of administrative delegation without authority, a situation that reinforces hierarchical governance structures common in traditional higher education systems where participation does not translate into influence (Deem et al., 2007; Macfarlane, 2011).

The findings, therefore, highlight a dynamic of *micro-level involvement but macro-level exclusion*, where ECRs contribute actively to everyday academic tasks yet remain largely absent from strategic institutional decision-making. ECRs appear to be engaged primarily in supportive or functional tasks, such as managing social media accounts, participating in logistical meetings, or helping with course coordination. These roles, while vital to institutional

operations, rarely involve input into broader policy questions, such as recruitment, curriculum reform, or faculty strategy. Some ECRs, like ECR8, reported being barred from attending departmental meetings altogether, an indication that their exclusion is not only structural but sometimes formally codified. Such dynamics align with Trowler's (2010) concept of "situated governance," where decision-making access is uneven and context dependent. Further, this marginalisation is reflective of what Kezar and Lester (2011) call "bounded participation," where ECRs are limited to circumscribed domains of action, under the assumption that strategic decision-making requires seniority or tenure. This separation between "technical" and "strategic" tasks parallels Musselin's (2013) critique of academic governance systems that isolate leadership roles from the everyday academic labour that sustains institutions.

Nevertheless, there are contextual exceptions showing limited involvement in EU-funded or collaborative projects, suggesting that external initiatives may offer parallel spaces for ECR voice and leadership. Some ECRs (ECR2 and ECR8) reported being included in international projects (e.g., EU-funded initiatives) where their contributions to decisions were more meaningful. This suggests that external partnerships may offer alternative governance spaces in which hierarchies are less rigid and meritocratic input is more valued (Enders & Musselin, 2008; Laudel & Gläser, 2008).

Additionally, a few ECRs described rare instances of being informally invited to give feedback by senior colleagues, which Trowler (2010) would define as "invited spaces" of participation. These are not institutionalised opportunities but rather conditional, ad hoc interactions dependent on interpersonal relationships. For example, ECR1 mentioned that they were asked for input on minor issues, but this was based on the goodwill of the senior academic involved rather than formal role allocation. These informal mechanisms, however, offer limited empowerment. As ECR8 recounted, attempts to oppose a departmental policy were ultimately ignored, highlighting the symbolic nature of such inclusion and its lack of consequence. This aligns with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, where ECRs remain on the lower rungs of tokenism, without real decision-making power. These comments suggest that while symbolic representation may be present in some governance structures, substantive participation remains elusive (De Boer et al., 2007). The inclusion of ECRs in technical or advisory committees without accompanying decision-making authority serves more as a mechanism for operational efficiency than one for inclusive governance.

This structure inadvertently discourages initiative, as ECRs internalise their marginal status and learn to adjust their expectations accordingly. As Kehm (2006) points out, institutional cultures that sideline ECRs can foster disengagement, limit innovation, and reinforce generational hierarchies. This is particularly problematic in systems like Türkiye's, where centralised governance models and rigid academic hierarchies persist and where there is a need for academic autonomy for universities (Akyol et al., 2018), further limiting horizontal leadership development.

Managerial perspectives also confirm these limitations. Manager1 stated that ECRs are *"engaged in basic duties, not at the policy level",* and Manager2 added that while they *"participate in committees",* they *"lack influence"*. These comments underscore the disconnect between participation and power, participation exists in form, but not in substance. Therefore, these comments suggest that while symbolic representation may be present in some governance structures, substantive participation remains elusive (De Boer et al., 2007). The managerial acknowledgment of ECRs' lack of strategic voice, despite their involvement in multiple operational domains, reveals the precarity of their professional standing, and institutional structures tend to reproduce seniority-based norms that disincentivise initiative and discourage leadership at the early career stage (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

### Perspectives on how ECRs' voices can be better heard

Across interviews, both ECRs and managers consistently emphasised the need for structural improvements that would ensure ECRs are meaningfully included in institutional governance. Suggestions focused on establishing formal representation mechanisms, fostering inclusive and transparent decision-making, and reducing hierarchical barriers. Several ECRs proposed the creation of participatory platforms, such as regular consultative meetings, surveys, and dedicated committees where ECRs can express their perspectives and contribute to policy discussions.

ECR1 clearly articulated a recurring theme among participants: "*There should be a system where ECRs are represented and supported*". Others echoed this sentiment with concrete proposals. ECR3 recommended the institutionalisation of routine consultation mechanisms: "*Certain meetings could be planned every month or every 2 months*" while ECR5 added: "*Surveys could be developed, and sincere meetings can be organised. Routine meetings do not provide any such possibilities to make good decisions*", suggesting dissatisfaction with existing practices and calling for more authentic engagement strategies.

More systemic recommendations included ECR7's call for inclusion in formal regulatory processes: "*ECRs should be involved in the preparation of regulations and directives. They must also be represented in academic progression*

*commissions. A suitable environment should be created where ECRs are heard such as in Senates*". ECR8 broadened the scope by emphasising cultural transformation within the institution: "*Universities should enable mind training and remove the pressure*", highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of exclusion and precarity.

Some participants advocated for a deeper cultural change. ECR3 and ECR8 stressed the need for non-hierarchical communication and active listening, reflecting a broader concern with institutional openness. ECR7 also highlighted concerns regarding academic freedom and the removal of self-censorship, identifying a barrier not only in representation but in voice and autonomy. Meanwhile, ECR6 proposed the development of formal legal frameworks and clearer policies regarding ECR roles and protections, underscoring the gap in institutional policy infrastructure.

These calls were also echoed by the managerial perspective. Manager1 supported "*the appointment of ECR representatives and more institutional inclusion"* while Manager 2 highlighted the importance of "*better representation in decision-making bodies and clearer progression paths*". Both managers acknowledged the underrepresentation of ECRs and recognised the need for reform within existing governance structures. Consequently, the data point to a shared desire for institutional mechanisms that move beyond symbolic inclusion. Concrete proposals include regular consultative meetings, ECR-specific surveys, participatory regulation drafting, and formal ECR roles in central decision-making bodies such as Senates or commissions. The emphasis on mentorship, transparency, and non-hierarchical engagement further illustrates that ECRs not only seek recognition but also a transformation of the academic culture to support their leadership, voice, and autonomy.

### Comparison between ECRs' and managers' responses to research questions

The comparative analysis of ECR and managerial responses reveals both convergence and divergence in perceptions regarding ECRs' roles and participation in institutional governance (Table 2). Both groups broadly agree that ECRs include PhD students, postdocs, and early-stage academics below the rank of associate professor, yet ECRs themselves emphasise autonomy and insecurity more strongly as markers of their status. While managers acknowledge ECRs' substantial contributions to teaching and administrative workloads, they tend to downplay the overload and emotional strain highlighted by ECRs.

On voice and representation, ECRs report a widespread sense of being formally present but substantively unheard, whereas managers accept the limitations but frame them as structurally inherent to hierarchical governance. Regarding influence on decision-making, both groups agree that ECRs are often confined to minor or operational matters; however, ECRs are more vocal about the absence of meaningful inclusion. Finally, while ECRs call for structural changes to ensure visibility and influence, managers point to cultural and institutional inertia as major barriers. These asymmetries suggest a

**Table 2. Comparison between the perceptions of ECRs vs. participant managers.**

| Research question | ECRs' perspective | Managers' perspective |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Who is an ECR? | Defined by time since PhD (typically <7 years), insecure contracts, and lack of academic title.<br>Often confused with PhD students. | ECRs include PhD students, assistants, and post-docs.<br>Blurred distinction; no official classification in the Turkish system. |
| 2. Work Undertaken as ECR? | Research, exam administration, teaching support, and committee work.<br>Rarely lecture or lead research independently. | Expected to assist in teaching and research.<br>Often dependent on a supervisor.<br>Need structured mentoring. |
| 3. To What Extent Are Voices Heard? | Mostly informal communication.<br>No formal participation.<br>Perceived as tokenism if included. | Participation is limited.<br>Hierarchical structure restricts influence.<br>Some informal input is allowed depending on context. |
| 4. Issues Where They Have a Say? | Involved in operational/bureaucratic matters (e.g., exam, course logistics).<br>No impact on strategic or academic policy. | Little to no role in academic decisions.<br>Procedural participation allowed (e.g., attending meetings, assisting with logistics). |
| 5. What Can Be Improved? | Inclusion in academic/senate boards.<br>Clearer promotion paths.<br>Infrastructure, funding, and mentoring support.<br>Transparent recruitment. | Define ECR nationally.<br>Create an inclusive culture.<br>Improve mentoring, develop structured paths for inclusion in decision-making (e.g., observers). |

systemic disconnect between managerial intent and ECR experience, underscoring the need for more inclusive and transparent governance practices in higher education institutions.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that ECRs are required to navigate multiple and often competing roles, including teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, which significantly constrain their capacity to engage in sustained scholarly development. This fragmented nature of academic work is further intensified within resource-constrained institutional contexts, where limited access to research support, mentorship, and structured guidance places disproportionate demands on ECRs. In line with these findings, institutional conditions play a decisive role in shaping workload demands and role expectations, often intensifying role conflict and constraining opportunities for academic progression (Andrews et al., 2020; Woolston, 2020; Kenny & Fluck, 2022). Within this context, the empirical findings related to the second research question further reveal a clear mismatch between institutional expectations and the structural support provided to ECRs; despite their central role in sustaining teaching and administrative functions, they remain marginalised within research and decision-making processes. Notably, the informal leadership roles they occasionally assume emerge not as indicators of genuine empowerment but rather as reflections of existing institutional gaps. Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenges faced by ECRs are not merely individual but are deeply embedded in broader institutional inequalities. Therefore, a shift toward more structured mentoring systems, transparent workload allocation, and equitable recognition practices is essential to support ECRs not only as educators and researchers but also as emerging academic leaders.

Moreover, this research highlights that ECRs play vital roles in academic and administrative operations within the case study university, yet their involvement in institutional governance remains marginal and context-dependent. Although they actively lead or contribute to various project-based tasks, such as managing websites, coordinating labs, and supporting quality assurance processes, these responsibilities are often informal, lacking recognition within institutional decision-making hierarchies.

Several structural and cultural barriers were therefore identified that limit ECRs' participation in governance. These include the lack of transparent appointment procedures, reliance on informal networks, generational hierarchies, and the absence of clear policies on ECR representation. At the same time, certain opportunities were reported, particularly for ECRs engaged in EU- or nationally funded projects, interdisciplinary collaborations, or mentorship networks.

A notable tension emerges between the high expectations placed on ECRs, often required to "prove" their leadership through overwork or informal responsibilities, and their precarious employment conditions, such as temporary contracts and employment insecurity. As recognised in the literature while ECRs are increasingly taking on managerial and coordination roles, their participation in governance remains mostly symbolic unless embedded in structural reforms (Keashly & Neumann, 2010; Leišytė, et al., 2026b). This situation exemplifies what has been described as "partial inclusion" (Lund, Blackmore & Rowlands, 2022), where ECRs perform academic citizenship duties but are denied full voice and power within institutional governance frameworks.

Moreover, this research reinforces the argument that ECRs' leadership potential is curtailed by institutional practices that undervalue their contributions. Although they are essential to the daily functioning of HEIs, particularly in research output, teaching, and service, they remain largely peripheral in decision-making. To move toward more inclusive and participatory university governance, several institutional recommendations can be made. Formal policy integration is needed to ensure that ECR representation is embedded within decision-making bodies, including faculty boards, senates, and strategic planning committees. In addition, structured mentorship programs should be developed not only to support research careers but also to cultivate leadership skills and institutional agency. Similarly, institutions should formally acknowledge the informal leadership roles ECRs already undertake, especially in administrative and coordination domains. Furthermore, clear and transparent promotion and evaluation criteria should reflect ECRs' diverse contributions beyond publication metrics alone, as well as academic units should encourage open dialogue and shared governance, reduce the impact of rigid hierarchies, and foster trust in institutional processes.

Ultimately, while ECRs demonstrate considerable responsibility, influence, and vision, their institutional positioning often prevents them from fully realising their leadership capacity. As this study shows, ECRs participate, but their representation is weak, mirroring broader trends observed across HEIs in different national contexts. Future research should continue to explore how institutional cultures, national policies, and funding environments shape ECR participation, particularly in under-researched regions.

To conclude, leadership in academia should not be seen merely as a function of seniority or title but as a process that includes vision, responsibility, and influence. ECRs already exhibit these qualities. It is therefore central to HEI's to recognise and institutionalise this potential and build more democratic, dynamic, and inclusive academic environments. Further research should explore how intersectional factors such as gender, age, institutional position, disciplinary field, and socio-economic background shape ECRs' lived experiences and career progression in academia, particularly within the Turkish higher education arena.

## Ethics and consent

Since this study involved adult academic participants, formal ethical clearance was not required under the ethical procedures governing the research conducted within the EU COST Action VOICES project; nevertheless, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

## Data availability

The data underlying this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality and anonymisation commitments made to research participants. Public disclosure could compromise participant privacy and confidentiality. Access to anonymised interview data may be considered upon reasonable request to sbaysan@adu.edu.tr, subject to the protection of participants' identities, compliance with the Turkish Personal Data Protection Law No. 6698 (KVKK), and approval by the relevant ethics committee where required. Requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to ensure that data sharing does not violate ethical, legal, or confidentiality obligations.

## Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely thank all early career researchers and senior academic managers who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences, perspectives, and insights. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the scholarly support and collaborative opportunities provided through COST Action CA20137 VOICES.

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**Version 2**

Reviewer Report 22 September 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.27228.r81473

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✓ **Kleopatra Nikolopoulou**
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

APPROVED

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

***Reviewer Expertise:*** ICT in Education

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

**Version 1**

Reviewer Report 01 September 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26356.r79783

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✓ **Kleopatra Nikolopoulou**
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

The paper is generally clear, well structured, and engages with relevant literature on ECR governance, participation, and representation. Some areas for improvement follow below:

- The context (institutional context) of the Turkish HE system could be expanded. Since centralized-hierarchical character of academic institution has similarities with other EU

countries, expand on the Turkey's context; e.g., are ECR permanent staff? how are they recruited? I think the cultural context is important (the authors refer to "structural and cultural barriers" in conclusion).
- A qualitative case study is appropriate for exploring lived experiences of ECRs. However, the rationale for selecting the specific university is not fully justified, and the sampling strategy could be better clarified. I also suggest expanding Table 1, so as to incorporate additional participants' characteristics described in text: gender, age-range, academic/job title (is it linked to permanency status?)
- To increase replicability of the study, please add coding framework, and the way of themes' validation. In Findings, I suggest the creation of a Table indicating/summarizing main themes, and corresponding excerpts.
- Finally, the authors state "Ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants" (however, 10 subjects were involved in the study).

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**
Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**
Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**
Partly

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
No source data required

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**
Not applicable

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**
Yes

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

***Reviewer Expertise:*** ICT in Education

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

Author Response 05 Sep 2026

**Rakibe Külcür**

**The paper is generally clear, well structured, and engages with relevant literature on ECR governance, participation, and representation. Some areas for improvement follow below: The context (institutional context) of the Turkish HE system could be**

**expanded. Since centralized-hierarchical character of academic institution has similarities with other EU countries, expand on the Turkey's context; e.g., are ECR permanent staff? how are they recruited? I think the cultural context is important (the authors refer to "structural and cultural barriers" in conclusion).**

T*hank you for this comment. We have provided more information on Turkey's context in p.3 as below: The experiences of ECRs need to be understood within the broader institutional and cultural context of the Turkish higher education system. Higher education in Türkiye is relatively centralised, with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) playing a pivotal role in regulating academic appointments, staffing and career progression. Although some ECRs hold permanent positions, research assistantships can involve fixed-term contracts, with contracts in some cases renewed every two years. Moreover, opportunities for ECRs to progress to permanent academic positions remain limited, creating competition for available posts and uncertainty around longer-term career development. These structural conditions are also shaped by hierarchical academic cultures, in which seniority, institutional relationships and established academic networks may influence opportunities for progression. Thus, ECR experiences of career development and insecurity should not be viewed solely as individual challenges but as situated within the wider institutional, cultural and structural conditions of academic work in Türkiye.*

**A qualitative case study is appropriate for exploring lived experiences of ECRs. However, the rationale for selecting the specific university is not fully justified, and the sampling strategy could be better clarified.**

Thank you for this helpful comment. We have now clarified the rationale for selecting the university and the sampling strategy in p.3. This research was carried out as a part of a qualitative case study within the framework of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action project *VOICES* (Working Group 2), focusing on country comparisons in inclusive governance in European HEIs. The university was selected primarily because one of the authors is affiliated with the institution, providing an appropriate institutional context for conducting the study. Within the university, academic staff from the Faculty of Education were purposively selected, with a particular focus on ECRs whose experiences were directly relevant to the research questions. The number of ECRs within the Faculty was limited; therefore, participants were selected across different departments to ensure that the sample represented ECRs from the range of disciplinary contexts within the Faculty. We also mention the article the following in p.4: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten participants, comprising eight ECRs and two managers. The ECR group comprised four ECRs with experience in institutional university governance bodies, including committees and four without such experience, one of whom was an externally affiliated PhD researcher. The sample was purposively selected to reflect diversity across disciplines, ranging from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields to the social sciences and humanities (Table 1), and across career stages, while ensuring gender and age balance with the exception of two male managers (a vice-dean and a senior academic administrator) which reflects gender imbalance in administrative duties. The sample population consisted of an equal number of male and female ECRs (four of each gender) and two male administrators. Age-wise, the ECRs were evenly distributed between the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups. The managers were aged between 35-44. The two managers included a Professor and an Associate Professor, both with direct administrative responsibilities. Among the ECRs were two PhD candidates (one external), three research assistants, three early-career academic staff (Dr. Lecturers and Dr. Academicians), each at different stages of the academic ladder, but typically considered within the ECR category

(Laudel & Gläser, 2008; European Commission, 2023).
**I also suggest expanding Table 1, so as to incorporate additional participants' characteristics described in text: gender, age-range, academic/job title (is it linked to permanency status?)**
Thank you. We have now expanded the table to include the participants' age ranges, although this information was already provided in the main text. We have decided not to disclose participants' job titles, as these could potentially reveal their identities and compromise anonymity, particularly given the limited number of ECRs at the university. Academic/job title is not linked to permanency status, which we mention in the text.
**To increase replicability of the study, please add coding framework, and the way of themes' validation.**
Thank you for this suggestion. We have provided further details on the coding framework and the validation of themes to enhance the transparency and replicability of the analysis in p.4. e.g.The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers, who coded the data and subsequently compared and discussed their coding to identify areas of agreement and disagreement and to reach a consensus. In line with the deductive approach adopted for the COST project, the initial coding framework and thematic categories were informed by the project's established conceptual framework. The emerging themes were then reviewed by the two researchers and checked against the interview data to ensure that they were adequately supported by participants' accounts and consistently applied across the dataset. Any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved through agreement between the researchers. The themes explored participants' perceptions of the definition of ECRs, the work undertaken by ECRs, their roles in institutional decision-making, the issues on which they have a voice, and their perspectives on how ECR voices could be better heard and represented.
**In Findings, I suggest the creation of a Table indicating/summarizing main themes, and corresponding excerpts.**
We have now added more information on the main themes. E.g. The themes explored participants' perceptions of the definition of ECRs, the work undertaken by ECRs, their roles in institutional decision-making, the issues on which they have a voice, and their perspectives on how ECR voices could be better heard and represented.
**Finally, the authors state "Ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants" (however, 10 subjects were involved in the study).**
Thank you for identifying this inconsistency. We acknowledge that the statement regarding the absence of human participants was a typo. Since the study involved adult academic participants, formal ethical clearance was not required under the ethical procedures governing the research conducted within the EU COST Action VOICES project; nevertheless, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection and their identities are anonymised.
[1] https://gendervoices.eu/

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 29 July 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26356.r77436

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**Kathleen Smithers**
School of Education, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to peer review this article. I found it to be interesting. Overall, it is well presented. However, my main concern is that there is not yet enough context provided about the academic system in Turkish HEIs, there is a lack of information regarding the sampling and the need for this research was not necessarily made clear.

Contextualisation of Turkish HE
For example, there are multiple positions described throughout the work but no explanation in the beginning regarding the academic hierarchy. It is not enough to assume that all EU universities are the same - they are not. More work needs to be done on the different types of institutions in Türkiye but also how this particular institution fits into the system. More work could also be done at the outset to contextualise what experiences of academics are in universities in Türkiye.

You should also include at the outset that there is no definition of ECRs in Türkiye - as this was buried in the results, and I was wondering who would even count as an ECR. In this way, I think it would also be important to provide a clear understanding of what the researchers have in their mind of what an ECR is - if someone is employed on a teaching-only contract, are they still an ECR?

The sampling
There is not a clear rationale for why the university was chosen as a case study. What does it represent in the context of Turkish HEIs? And why is it a good case? If it is more about convienence, then I think it is okay to state it was chosen for that reason, but it should be made clear.

In a similar vein, it was unclear to me how the differing participants could be a representative sample. Having one person from a gender solely in a discipline isn't necessarily representative of that discipline. I think more explanation of how these people were 'purposively' selected might be good - and if they were purposively sampled, what was the overall pool to sample from?

If there is no definition of ECRs in Türkiye, was this a self-selected category of ECRs? How did the researchers decide who is or is not an ECR?

The need for this research
Let me state first and foremost, I believe unequivocally that ECRs should be represented in governance and have their voices heard. However, the article did not explain enough why it is important for ECRs to be heard. It assumes the reader agrees that ECRs need to be represented.

Why do multiple levels of the academic hierarchy need to be represented in governance structures? What is the position that ECRs bring that is unique to the experiences of those who are currently represented on governance structures? How are they currently represented? What does the research literature say about this?

As it stands, I think the paper does not do enough set up work - this is also evident in the brief discussion of the theoretical framework; more is needed there as well.

Broad comments
The There are acronyms in the abstract that are not spelt out in the first instance, and the same within the manuscript for 'CRs' - what are CRs? This is not explained at all in the manuscript and the acronym is not expanded.

I wasnt sure if research question 2 had a fit within the rest of the research questions. It seems much broader than the scope of this article.

You state there is an 'increasing presence' of ECRs in the opening paragraph - but what are the statistics to suppor tthis?

In the findings under 'who is an ECR' you open the section with 'participants shared a common understanding of ECRs as individuals who are post PhD' - but this is contradicted by the quotes from your participants that follow.

I also don't think that ethics approval needs to be stated in the abstract, and there seems to be an error at the end of the paper under the heading 'ethics and consent' that states there was no ethics approval obtained, even though the manuscript states there was.

Thank you for the manuscript; it was interesting. I hope with some slight revisions it will be strengthened.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**
Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**
Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**
Partly

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
No source data required

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**
Not applicable

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**
Partly

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

***Reviewer Expertise:*** I am a researcher interested in higher education, precarity and early career researchers.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.**

Author Response 05 Sep 2026

**Rakibe Külcür**

Thank you for the opportunity to peer review this article. I found it to be interesting. Overall, it is well presented. However, my main concern is that there is not yet enough context provided about the academic system in Turkish HEIs, there is a lack of information regarding the sampling and the need for this research was not necessarily made clear. Contextualisation of Turkish HE. For example, there are multiple positions described throughout the work but no explanation in the beginning regarding the academic hierarchy. It is not enough to assume that all EU universities are the same - they are not. More work needs to be done on the different types of institutions in Türkiye but also how this particular institution fits into the system. More work could also be done at the outset to contextualise what experiences of academics are in universities in Türkiye.

Thank you for this comment. We have provided more information on Türkiye's context as below: In p.1 The research workforce in Europe has expanded considerably in recent years, with the number of researchers increasing by approximately 45% between 2012 and 2022 and doctoral enrolment also showing an overall upward trend (European Commission, 2023). This expansion has increased the importance of understanding the experiences and participation of researchers at different career stages, including those at the early stages of their careers. Before the following: However, despite their increasing presence and essential contributions to research and teaching, the involvement of ECRs in institutional decision-making remains marginalised compared to that of more senior academic staff (De Boer, et al., 2007; Brami, et. al, 2023). In p.2: The representation of ECRs in university governance is important because decision-making structures should reflect the perspectives of different career stages within the academic community. University governance has traditionally been dominated by senior academics, while ECRs often occupy more junior and less secure positions and experience particular challenges related to career progression, access to resources, research opportunities, workload and participation in institutional decision-making. These experiences can provide perspectives that may be less visible in governance structures dominated by senior academics, making ECR participation relevant not only for their own working conditions but also for more inclusive and responsive institutional decision-making. Recent comparative research across Europe confirms that ECR representation in university and faculty-level decision-making bodies remains limited, although their voices may be heard through informal channels (Leišytė et al., 2026a; Leišytė et al., 2026b). This suggests that, despite their significant contribution to research and the future sustainability of academic institutions, ECRs remain insufficiently

represented in formal governance structures, highlighting the need to examine how their voices can be more meaningfully incorporated into university decision-making. In p.3: The experiences of ECRs need to be understood within the broader institutional and cultural context of the Turkish higher education system. Higher education in Türkiye is relatively centralised, with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) playing an important role in regulating academic appointments, staffing and career progression. Although some ECRs hold permanent positions, research assistantships can involve fixed-term contracts, with contracts in some cases renewed every two years. Moreover, opportunities for ECRs to progress to permanent academic positions remain limited, creating competition for available posts and uncertainty around longer-term career development. These structural conditions are also shaped by hierarchical academic cultures, in which seniority, institutional relationships and established academic networks may influence opportunities for progression. Thus, ECR experiences of career development and insecurity should not be viewed solely as individual challenges but as situated within the wider institutional, cultural and structural conditions of academic work in Türkiye.

You should also include at the outset that there is no definition of ECRs in Türkiye - as this was buried in the results, and I was wondering who would even count as an ECR. In this way, I think it would also be important to provide a clear understanding of what the researchers have in their mind of what an ECR is - if someone is employed on a teaching-only contract, are they still an ECR?
Thank you for this comment. We have provided more information on Turkey's context in p.3 as below: There is no nationally standardised definition of an ECR in Türkiye. As this study was conducted within the framework of the EU COST Action, we therefore adopted the broader understanding of ECR used by the European Commission. In this study, ECR refers to researchers who are at an early stage of their research careers, during or following their PhD, and who are actively engaged in research. The term is used to describe a stage of career development rather than a specific occupational or contractual status. It should also be noted that in this study we aim to find out participant perceptions what constitutes an ECR. This is also highlighted in p.3.

The sampling There is not a clear rationale for why the university was chosen as a case study. What does it represent in the context of Turkish HEIs? And why is it a good case? If it is more about convienence, then I think it is okay to state it was chosen for that reason, but it should be made clear.
Thank you for this helpful comment. We have now added more info on the rationale for selecting the university and the sampling strategy in p.3. This research was carried out as a part of a qualitative case study within the framework of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action project VOICES (Working Group 2), focusing on country comparisons in inclusive governance in European HEIs. The university was selected primarily because one of the authors is affiliated with the institution, providing an appropriate convenient institutional context for conducting the study.

In a similar vein, it was unclear to me how the differing participants could be a representative sample. Having one person from a gender solely in a discipline isn't necessarily representative of that discipline. I think more explanation of how these people were 'purposively' selected might be good - and if they were purposively sampled, what was

the overall pool to sample from?
Thank you for this helpful comment. We have the following info: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten participants, comprising eight ECRs and two managers. The ECR group comprised four ECRs with experience in institutional university governance bodies, including committees and four without such experience, one of whom was an externally affiliated PhD researcher. The sample was purposively selected to reflect diversity across disciplines, ranging from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields to the social sciences and humanities (Table 1), and across career stages, while ensuring gender and age balance with the exception of two male managers (a vice-dean and a senior academic administrator) which reflects gender imbalance in administrative duties. The sample population consisted of an equal number of male and female ECRs (four of each gender) and two male administrators. Age-wise, the ECRs were evenly distributed between the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups. We have also added additional information to clarify the rationale for selecting the university and the sampling strategy on p. 3. Within the university, academic staff from the Faculty of Education were purposively selected, with a particular focus on ECRs whose experiences were directly relevant to the research questions. Given the fact that the relatively small pool of ECRs within the Faculty, participants were selected across different departments and disciplinary contexts, with gender considered alongside disciplinary background and other relevant characteristics; the aim was not to claim statistical representativeness, but to capture a range of ECR experiences across the Faculty and ensure that the sample was not defined by gender or discipline alone.

If there is no definition of ECRs in Türkiye, was this a self-selected category of ECRs? How did the researchers decide who is or is not an ECR?
This study was conducted within the EU COST Action framework, we adopted the broader European Commission understanding of early-career researchers. In line with the most recent European framework for research careers, including doctoral candidates and researchers in the postdoctoral or equivalent early stages of their careers. Accordingly, in this study, ECR refers to researchers at these early career stages who are engaged in research, rather than to a specific occupational or contractual status. We have added the following in p.3 the following: There is no nationally standardised definition of an ECR in Türkiye. As this study was conducted within the framework of the EU COST Action, we therefore adopted the broader understanding of ECR used by the European Commission. In this study, ECR refers to researchers who are at an early stage of their research careers, during or following their PhD, and who are actively engaged in research. The term is used to describe a stage of career development rather than a specific occupational or contractual status. It should also be noted that in this study we aim to find out participant perceptions what constitutes an ECR. This is also highlighted in p.3.

The need for this research. Let me state first and foremost, I believe unequivocally that ECRs should be represented in governance and have their voices heard. However, the article did not explain enough why it is important for ECRs to be heard. It assumes the reader agrees that ECRs need to be represented. Why do multiple levels of the academic hierarchy need to be represented in governance structures? What is the position that ECRs bring that is unique to the experiences of those who are currently represented on governance structures? How are they currently represented? What does the research literature say

about this?

We have strengthened the rationale for the study by clarifying why ECR representation in university governance matters in p.1 - 2. This include: The research workforce in Europe has expanded considerably in recent years, with the number of researchers increasing by approximately 45% between 2012 and 2022 and doctoral enrolment also showing an overall upward trend (European Commission, 2023). This expansion has increased the importance of understanding the experiences and participation of researchers at different career stages, including those at the early stages of their careers. There is a similar trend in Türkiye (YÖK, 2026; Gokalp, 2023). However, despite their increasing presence and essential contributions to research and teaching, the involvement of ECRs in institutional decision-making remains marginalised compared to that of more senior academic staff (De Boer, et al., 2007; Brami, et. al, 2023). (....) The representation of ECRs in university governance is important because decision-making structures should reflect the perspectives of different career stages within the academic community. University governance has traditionally been dominated by senior academics, while ECRs often occupy more junior and less secure positions and experience particular challenges related to career progression, access to resources, research opportunities, workload and participation in institutional decision-making. These experiences can provide perspectives that may be less visible in governance structures dominated by senior academics, making ECR participation relevant not only for their own working conditions but also for more inclusive and responsive institutional decision-making. Recent comparative research across Europe confirms that ECR representation in university and faculty-level decision-making bodies remains limited, although their voices may be heard through informal channels (Leišytė et al., 2026a; Leišytė et al., 2026b). This suggests that, despite their significant contribution to research and the future sustainability of academic institutions, ECRs remain insufficiently represented in formal governance structures, highlighting the need to examine how their voices can be more meaningfully incorporated into university decision-making.

Broad comments There are acronyms in the abstract that are not spelt out in the first instance, and the same within the manuscript for 'CRs' - what are CRs? This is not explained at all in the manuscript and the acronym is not expanded.
Thank you for this comment. We have now corrected and expanded the acronyms in the abstract. In one instant we used CR instead of Early Career Researchers' (ECRs) which we corrected in the text.

I wasnt sure if research question 2 had a fit within the rest of the research questions. It seems much broader than the scope of this article. Research Question 2, which examined the nature and scope of the work undertaken by ECRs, was included to explore the roles and responsibilities that ECRs perform within decision-making bodies, such as committees, and to assess the extent to which their participation involves substantive engagement in decision-making or is limited primarily to administrative tasks.

You state there is an 'increasing presence' of ECRs in the opening paragraph - but what are the statistics to support this?
We agree that the statement regarding the "increasing presence" of ECRs was insufficiently supported and could be misleading We have therefore revised the opening paragraph to

refer instead to the broader expansion of the researchers.
In the findings under 'who is an ECR' you open the section with 'participants shared a common understanding of ECRs as individuals who are post PhD' - but this is contradicted by the quotes from your participants that follow. We believe that this statement is not contradictory since this study was conducted within the EU COST Action project Gender VOICES, we adopted the broader European Commission understanding of early-career researchers. In addition, we aimed to reveal research participant's perceptions on ECRs. We have now highlighted the following in p.3: This study aims to explore ECRs' perceptions and experiences, as well as their roles in institutional governance and leadership.

I also don't think that ethics approval needs to be stated in the abstract, and there seems to be an error at the end of the paper under the heading 'ethics and consent' that states there was no ethics approval obtained, even though the manuscript states there was.
Thank you for this comment. We now deleted the informed consent statement from the abstract. Thank you for identifying the inconsistency under the heading 'ethics and consent'. We acknowledge that the statement was incorrect. Since the study involved adult academic participants, formal ethical clearance was not required under the ethical procedures governing the research conducted within the EU COST Action VOICES project; nevertheless, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Moreover, we do not mention in the text we have an ethical approval.

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.