

Realising the Full Potential of Research Returners: Technical Document

The Daphne Jackson Trust undertook a survey of former Daphne Jackson Trust Fellows and Wellcome Trust Career Re-entry Fellows during the first half of 2021. The survey was undertaken on a platform called [Crowdoscope](#) which enables participants to answer a series of questions to find out their own views on a certain topic, to then see other respondent's answers and finally rate how much they agree or disagree with those answers.

All participants were asked the following discussion question and allowed free text to answer:

- What do you think are the main barriers to career progression for research Returners? Please explain why.

Participants were then presented with a selection of other people's responses and asked to evaluate:

- How much do you agree with this? (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)
- How much has this barrier impacted your career progression? (Not at all - Very significantly)

In total, 102 answers were collected. Demographic data relating to gender, ethnicity and career stage were also gathered.

Words most often mentioned in the descriptive text

The following words were most often mentioned in answer to the discussion question: What do you think are the main barriers to career progression for research Returners? Scores 1 and 2 reflect the levels of agreement and impact on career progression as a mean percentage:

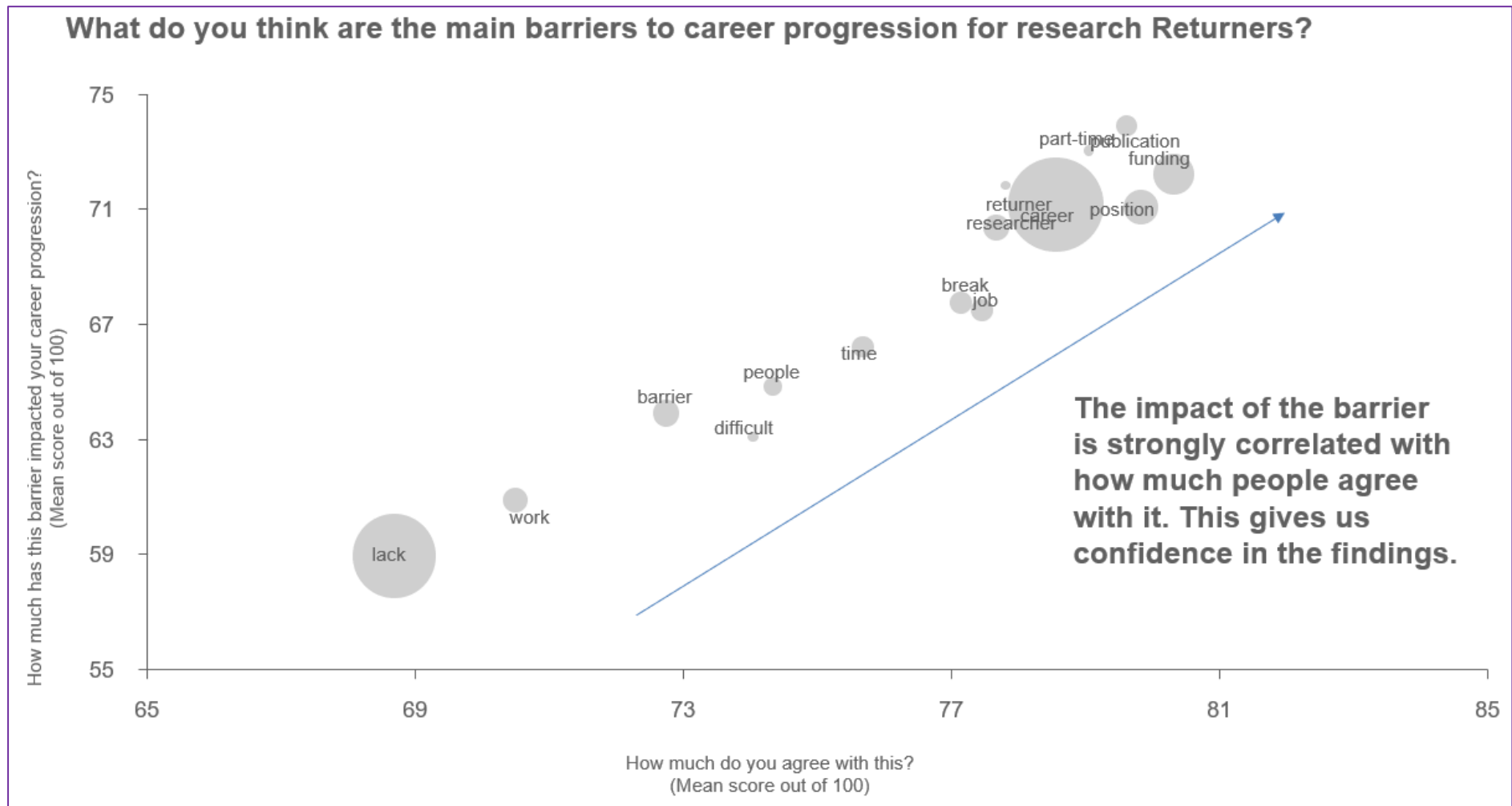
Tag	Score One	Score Two	No. of Ratings	Number of Comments
career	78.7	71.1	181	31
lack	68.7	58.6	166	24
time	75.9	66.5	91	22
break	77.1	67.7	92	21
funding	80.5	72.4	115	19
publication	79.6	73.9	89	19
returner	77.8	71.8	77	17
researcher	78.0	70.4	99	16
barrier	72.8	63.5	97	15
job	77.5	67.5	91	14
position	79.9	71.2	108	14
work	70.5	60.9	95	14
difficult	74.0	63.1	77	13
part-time	79.0	73.0	77	13
people	74.4	64.9	88	13

Score One = How much do you agree with this? (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)

Score Two = How much has this barrier impacted your career progression? (Not at all - Very significantly)

Correlation between agreement and impact

There was a strong correlation between the level of agreement and the perception of career impact for responses containing these commonly mentioned words. Generally, responses with the words 'part-time', 'publication' and 'funding' elicited the strongest level of agreement with the biggest impact on career progression. The fact that a strong relationship exists between levels of agreement and perceptions of career impact is a good signal that responders were generally experiencing the same issues giving more confidence in the findings (i.e. the higher the agreement, the greater the impact).



Top ten barriers identified by Returners

The following table shows the raw, unedited descriptions of the top ten barriers faced by Returners. The response with the high level of agreement (score one) is shown first, the others in descending order. This however should not be interpreted as 'league table' as levels of agreements are tightly clustered across all ten barriers described below. All comments should be taken as a whole to reflect the biggest barriers Returners face.

What do you think are the main barriers to career progression for research Returners?

Comment	Score One	Score Two	No. of Ratings
Getting career established when you are older - number of papers etc that you have against your age, rather than against your experience. Being seen as having the same potential as someone younger. May be less likely to be in a position to move around for jobs. Working part-time not always viewed favourably by PI. Grants are usually written and advertised for full-time researchers so it needs a flexible PI to take the risk.	80.4	74.0	12
Many returners are limited in their ability to move institutions, due to family commitments, so can only apply for posts in their local area. Returners have a gap in publications which counts against them in comparison to others and highlights the fact that there is a gap in their CV.	78.3	75.5	11
1. Confidence to re-enter academia, as there seem to be so many unwritten rules and understandings amongst those who have pursued this career. I have found that I have stumbled across information rather than it being actively shared regarding funding, career pathways etc. Despite feeling confident in my home and other career, I constantly feel on the back foot within academia as there is an expectation that I should 'just know things'. I am not referring to the science but rather the politics etc. 2. It is hard to balance academia with family even though my children are older which makes you permanently guilty regarding one aspect or another. 3. Finally, financial considerations: because life as an early career researcher is so tenuous, moving from one fixed term contract to another , it is very difficult to plan how to cope as each one finishes. I am lucky to have a profession outside research but this is as a clinician and when contracts seem to be decided at the last minute it is hard to plan for external work. If I was not married to a husband with a good job I am not sure that I could progress within this area. It leaves you feeling that this is an indulgence rather than a career.	76.1	68.0	16
I think there are three main sources of barriers to career progression; 1. Unfair comparison against individuals who have not had a career break (this may be in terms of experience, income generation, management of other people, the lack of networking opportunities, etc) . 2. The perception that part time roles are not suitable for senior positions. 3. Lack of confidence to apply for a career promotion.	75.8	68.2	9
Score One = How much do you agree with this? (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree) Score Two = How much has this barrier impacted your career progression? (Not at all - Very significantly)			

Comment	Score One	Score Two	No. of Ratings
<p>Job insecurity – even more so with Covid-19. The preference for short term research contracts and the sometimes unavoidable need to relocate for your next provides no long-term stability for someone with family commitments. When a contract ends, it's not feasible to move to another part of the country - or world - for the next position. It's incompatible with raising a family and schooling. Covid-19 has made the funding situation worse with even more competition for existing funding sources.</p>	75.0	68.5	14
<p>The culture of research & the need for immediacy, and ever increasing productivity and pressure to deliver more research and teaching responsibilities, all while attaining funding. These are very difficult to balance with family and caring needs that are just as important. There are few flexi-time or job-share positions in research that would help suit childcare arrangements, for instance during school holiday periods of if my child is ill.</p>	74.5	63.1	14
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for a long enough period to get re-established in research to the point that we are competitive for grants. Supervision and research support which takes into account the additional needs of someone returning to research after a long break. Work-life balance - many returning parents/carers continue to have significant caring responsibilities after returning to work. However, in order to make up ground lost during periods spent out of academia it is necessary to work long hours. Grants that allow returners enough time to get re-established while working reasonable hours are needed. Institutionalized bias against people with gaps in their academic careers and the emphasis on publication record as the primary measure of competence 	72.0	58.0	6
<p>The unforgiving funding landscape and lack of funding opportunities is a huge barrier. Eligibility requirements for grants can exclude returners. Arbitrary decision-making by funders based on questions that ask for research outputs within the last "5 " or "10" years are detrimental to returners who inevitably have fewer papers and less impact because of their career break. They impact negatively on part-time researchers – it creates a double whammy of negative effects where you are often viewed as less competitive.</p>	72.0	65.6	12
<p>Having got back in, age is a major barrier...there are more ample funding opportunities for research, for travel to conferences and more training opportunities for early career researchers and so few opportunities for anyone else.</p> <p>Also part-time is still not highly regarded, esp in uni, it is deemed less productive, whereas to the contrary pro-rata research is often much more highly productive. The PIs want publications from you at the same output rate as full-timers- in my experience.</p>	71.3	64.5	9
<p>The peer review of grant applications is biased against returners and part-time staff. With fewer research outputs, peer reviewers judge more harshly than someone that has taken a more 'traditional' research career pathway.</p>	71.0	64.7	13

Score One = How much do you agree with this? (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)

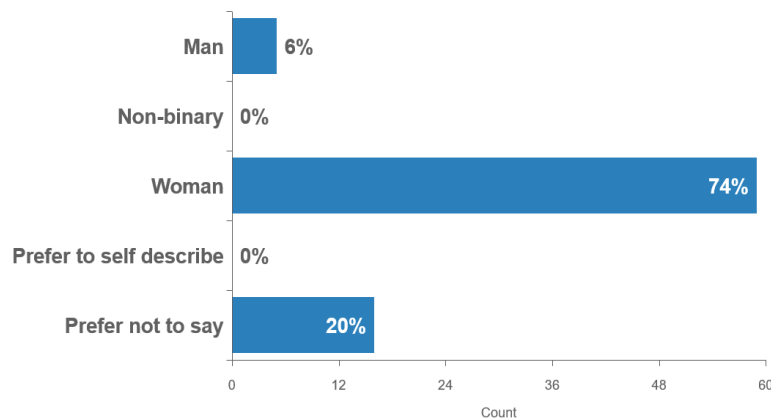
Score Two = How much has this barrier impacted your career progression? (Not at all - Very significantly)

Demographic data amongst responders

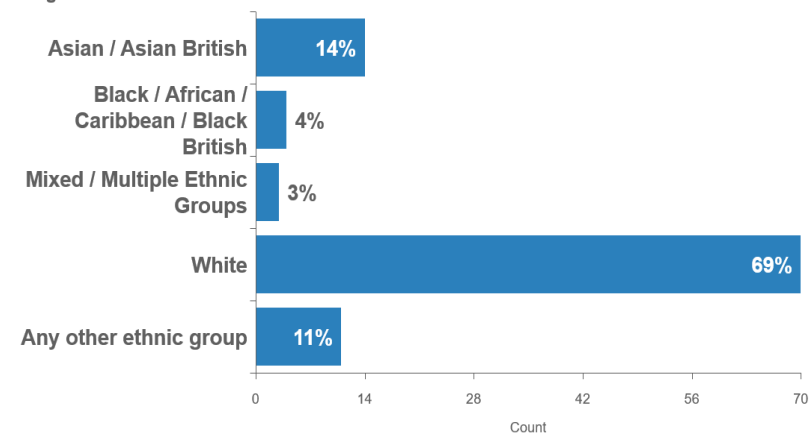
Former Fellows were asked about their gender, ethnicity and stage of career. The number of respondents was too low to sufficiently represent diversity across the different characteristics measured. Several factors should be noted:

- This is a relatively small survey (102 responses) reflective of the niche cohort of former Returner Fellows (of which there are <400 in total). Diversity metrics will therefore be more overtly influenced by these small numbers. Even modest changes in the response-rate could significantly change demographic proportions and the associated barriers. Analysing the results in this way is therefore not recommended.
- The diversity of Returner Fellows will change in the future. Current Returners undertaking their Fellowships are more diverse than ever. It will be necessary to update this work in future as more data become available from the growing former Fellows cohort.
- Cultural sensitivities and willingness to complete surveys must be considered and reflected upon. More work is needed to build trust and engagement with less represented groups.
- Initiatives that aim to change research culture (Wellcome Trust, Royal Society, UKRI and Learned Societies) will change perceptions in the future. The findings collected here represented a baseline on which future comparisons of the former Fellows cohort may be made.

What best describes your gender?



What is your ethnic group? Please choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.



At what stage are you in your career?

