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Creating a rewarding research experience in the earlycareer stages Challenges and insights from the rEACH Summer School participants

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Creating a rewarding research experience in the early-career stages: Challenges and insights from the rEACH Summer School participants

1. Introduction

The International Association for Communication in Healthcare (EACH) organized its biennial rEACH summer school in September 2023, supporting the growth of early career researchers (masters students, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers) in healthcare communication [1]. The Summer School, held online over three days, gathered 12 participants from nine countries and four continents. Participants had the opportunity to showcase their research projects and receive feedback from peers and experts in health communication. In this way, the Summer School not only contributed to improving participants' projects and research skills, but also established an international research network. Participants highly valued the Summer School, as they experienced benefits from discussing their individual experiences and collective challenges in research.

With these rEACH Association Pages, the participants of the 2023 rEACH Summer School (see Fig. 1) will elaborate on their experiences and challenges in their research journey and present some solutions to creating a rewarding research experience. In this way, they hope to inspire other researchers to make the most of their research journey in terms of personal and professional development.

2. Challenges for early career researchers

Participants engaged in thought-provoking questions about personal fulfillment and the quest for purpose in their research. The challenges of getting one's voice heard in a competitive field, understanding the power dynamics within supervisory teams, and defining project scopes were recognized. Participants were able to discuss these challenges and identify potential strategies to overcome them.

3. Team dynamics and communication with supervisors

The journey of early-career researchers can be a notoriously lonely time, as they may feel that the responsibility of the research project rests squarely on their shoulders. Therefore, early-career researchers may require both intellectual guidance and emotional support. There is variance in how academics label and implement emotional support. Bradley et al. [2] provided insights into effective emotional communication strategies within teams, like the use of humour, active listening, and reappraisal. They also considered factors that may contribute to solving communication challenges, such as using creativity [2]. However, they also discussed how some of these emotional support styles may cause harm and increase distress.

Participants experienced that, in early-career research, the choice of supervisor is critical to the overall quality of experience of the research journey. While some supervisors may be highly accomplished in their fields, this does not necessarily mean that they will be available or supportive in their mentorship of students. Participants felt it useful to choose someone who has had previous positive post-graduate supervisory relationships. It may also be helpful to have multiple supervisors on board the team, to ensure that where one may not be available or lack the necessary knowledge and experience, the other(s) may be able to pick up the shortfall. However, participants having multiple supervisors also noted some challenges, particularly concerning differences in multidisciplinary team practices and the integration of conflicting inputs.

4. Social support

For many students, a research project may be the largest and most time-intensive project they have ever undertaken individually, with little opportunity for delegation or team support. Research has indicated that adequate social support is an important factor in determining the success of a doctoral student [3]. Participants agreed that it may therefore be important to build relationships and social structures that can serve as a supportive network during the research journey. For example, groups of fellow postgraduate students working together at designated times – even on very different projects – can be helpful in providing structure and accountability for completing writing tasks. Fellow students can also be helpful in acting as a sounding board for conference presentations or in proof-reading pieces of writing.

Additionally, connections with other staff members both within internal and external departments can provide opportunities for wider input on a project, beyond the area of expertise of one's own supervisor (s). Participants recognized that building supportive networks, both professionally and personally, can provide invaluable outlets for discussing challenges and maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

5. Self-care practices

According to the World Health Organization, self-care is the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote and maintain health, prevent disease, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider [4]. Early-career researchers often struggle with self-care for several reasons. For example, a PhD can be very demanding and time-consuming given the intense workload. Students may find themselves immersed in research, teaching, and other

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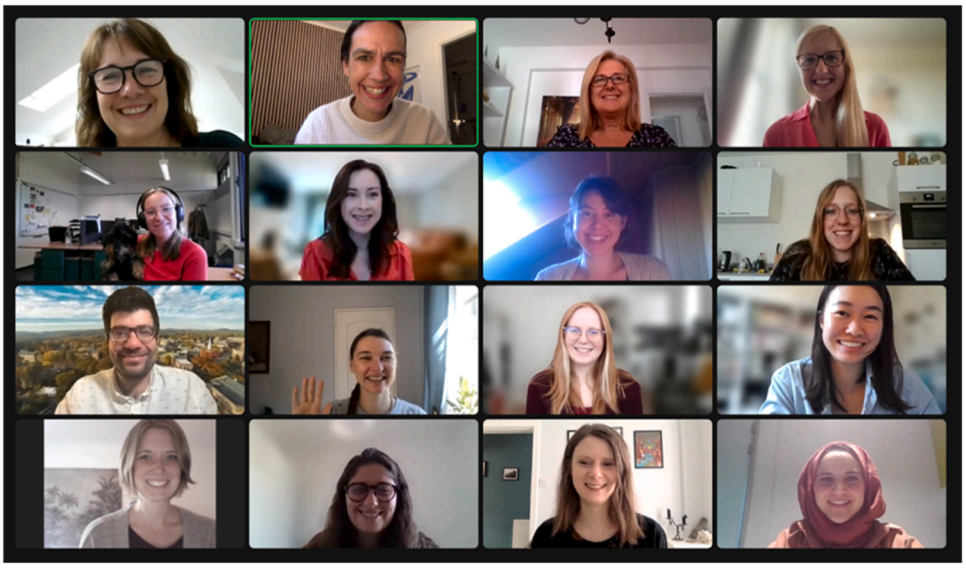


Fig. 1. The 12 participants of the rEACH Summer School 2023, plus junior and senior facilitators.

responsibilities, leaving little time for self-care. Another reason reported by participants may be the immense pressure to succeed. In academia, there are high expectations to produce original and impactful research. This pressure may lead to long working hours, neglecting breaks and, thus, sacrificing personal time to succeed in academia. Conducting independent research can be isolating, as students may spend long hours working alone. The lack of social interaction can contribute to feelings of loneliness and a sense of being overwhelmed. Perfectionism may be another barrier to self-care. The fear of failure amalgamated with high unrealistic expectations can lead to overworking and neglecting one's wellbeing.

Participants discussed that addressing these challenges may require a cultural shift in academia, promoting a healthier work-life balance and recognizing the importance of well-being in academic success. Universities and departments can play a crucial role by offering support services, promoting a positive and inclusive academic culture, and encouraging open discussions about mental health. On a personal level, there are also some existing guidelines for how students can practically enact self-care [5,6]. In navigating the challenges of academia, it may be crucial to embrace setbacks as part of the journey, understanding that failure is a natural aspect of growth and can be overcome with perseverance. Participants discussed the value of "patience", as a key for recognizing that progress often unfolds gradually and does not always follow a straight path. Comparing oneself to others may undermine individual progress and strengths, so it may be helpful to focus on personal growth and accomplishments. To do that, participants discussed how prioritizing activities outside of work that bring joy and relaxation, and reserving weekends for self-care and rejuvenation, could help to recharge. Additionally, adequate sleep and a healthy lifestyle are fundamental for sustaining productivity and mental clarity. Finally, since the research journey is also a pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery, they suggested that periodic breaks from work can help gaining perspective, emphasizing the value of travel and time spent outside of the academic environment in fostering personal growth and creativity. Researchers are often high achievers in the pursuit of answers and excellence, but to acknowledge the title of *student* is to accept that it is normal and valid to not have all the answers to the never-ending questions. This approach may be helpful in finding a good balance between the quest for answers and the management of frustration and vulnerability.

6. Conclusion

This perspective piece provides a snapshot of the challenges faced by early career researchers, as identified during and after the rEACH Summer School. By discussing these challenges and presenting practical solutions, the goal is to inspire researchers to maintain their wellbeing, as a key to both research success and longevity.

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