



GYA STATEMENT

Science Cannot Afford to Lose a Generation

On World Mental Health Day, the Global Young Academy (GYA) calls attention to a crisis unfolding within the institutions that produce scientific knowledge. A preregistered systematic review and meta-analysis of 148 studies and four primary databases, covering more than 138,000 early-career researchers (ECRs) and published in *Nature Human Behaviour* in June 2026,¹ found that 29.9% of ECRs report elevated psychological distress on validated screening thresholds. Elevated depressive symptoms (29.8%), anxiety symptoms (29.7%) and eating disorder symptoms (28.3%) were the most common, followed by alcohol misuse (22.9%), suicidal ideation (18.8%) and non-suicidal self-injury (18.6%). Depressive symptoms were approximately two to three times, and anxiety symptoms three to five times, more prevalent than in age-matched general-population samples.

Demographic and individual characteristics showed only limited associations with these estimates, suggesting that the burden is not confined to particular groups of researchers. The study authors therefore call for structural reform and the implementation of evidence-based support services for ECRs. This is not only a mental-health warning. It is an alarm about the sustainability of science itself — and, on this day, a direct concern for United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 on good health and well-being, specifically Target 3.4, which includes promoting mental health and well-being.²

This burden falls on a generation in which governments and institutions have invested heavily in ECRs. These scientists are highly trained, globally connected, and expected to address the defining challenges of our time — from pandemic preparedness to climate change. Yet the systems they work within repeatedly undermine their capacity to contribute and thrive. Short-term contracts,³ delayed funding decisions, opaque progression pathways, and weak supervisory accountability generate chronic insecurity⁴ — and longitudinal evidence shows that

this insecurity, shaped by institutional culture and role ambiguity, can persist even after job security improves.³

ECRs in low-resource and disruption-affected settings carry additional burdens. The GYA's own Global State of Young Scientists (GloSYS) Africa study, drawing on ECRs born in 42 of Africa's 54 countries, identified job insecurity, heavy teaching loads that leave insufficient time and resources for research, inequities experienced particularly by women researchers, and inadequate support for international mobility as persistent barriers.⁵ Laboratory closures, mobility restrictions, and institutional instability can erase months or years of progress — with the consequences recorded not as systemic failure but as individual shortcomings.

The cumulative result is a system that has become better at producing skilled researchers than at creating conditions in which they can actually work. The widespread distress documented by the meta-analysis is one symptom.¹ Another is the quiet departure of talented scientists who conclude that a research career is neither sustainable nor equitable.⁶ GloSYS Africa makes this risk concrete: despite strong motivation to do research and contribute to society, 80% of respondents had considered leaving Africa to continue their careers, and around 60% had considered leaving their employment for a different sector.⁵

Because these pressures are structural, they cannot be treated as an individual well-being problem to be solved by resilience workshops and counselling services alone. Researchers need access to confidential professional support — but support services cannot correct the working conditions that repeatedly generate the pressure they are meant to address. Institutions that respond to distress without examining its structural causes are managing symptoms, not the disease.

The GYA therefore calls on governments, funders, universities, and scientific organizations to act on six fronts that tackle these structural causes while ensuring that support is available to those who need it now:

- **Measure working conditions alongside research outputs:** Career insecurity, supervision quality, resource access, and researcher well-being should feature in national and institutional assessments, not only publication counts and grant volumes.
- **Reduce avoidable career uncertainty:** This can be done by providing timely contract decisions, transparent progression criteria, and bridge funding where appropriate — as well as by distinguishing the inherent uncertainty of discovery from the unnecessary uncertainty imposed by poorly designed systems.
- **Distinguish systemic disruption from individual failure:** When laboratories close, fieldwork is interrupted, or mobility is blocked by conflict or administrative barriers, institutions must respond with formal procedures — extensions, revised work plans, access to partner institutions — rather than recording the consequences as poor performance.
- **Ensure that capacity-building connects to genuine opportunity:** Training programmes should link to actual funding, infrastructure, and meaningful scientific responsibility, not substitute for them.
- **Provide accessible mental health support:** Institutions should ensure early-career researchers have free, confidential access to counselling services, train

supervisors to recognise signs of distress and refer appropriately, and promote peer-support networks that reduce isolation.

- **Promote Work-life balance:** Reward sustainable research, not overwork. Hiring, promotion and funding decisions should value quality over volume, and recognise protected rest time as a condition of good research rather than a sign of low commitment.

Acting on these fronts requires shared commitment, because no single actor can resolve these pressures alone. Governments shape employment and mobility policies; funders control timelines and access to resources; universities define supervision and progression; academies connect researchers across disciplines and generations. Each holds part of the responsibility, and each must act.

This responsibility is collective because the stakes are collective: the documented mental-health burden among ECRs is an indicator of the health of the scientific enterprise as a whole.

For this reason, the GYA asks every institution that benefits from scientific talent one direct question: ***Are we creating conditions in which emerging researchers can build sustainable careers and contribute, without carrying avoidable structural pressure as an individual burden?***

Answering this question honestly means that science can no longer normalise career uncertainty, repeated disruption, and lost talent as ordinary features of academic life.

Science cannot afford to lose a generation.

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Reviewed and approved by the GYA Executive Committee.

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ABOUT THE GYA

The vision of the GYA is *science for all; science for the future*, and its mission is to give a voice to young scientists and researchers around the world. The GYA, founded in 2010, is an independent science academy of 200 outstanding early- to mid-career researchers from six continents who are selected from across disciplines based on their academic excellence and commitment to engage with society. GYA members serve five-year terms, and the GYA presently counts members from around 100 countries. The GYA administrative Office is hosted at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina. The wide array of GYA activities are supported by a range of international public and private funders. The GYA gratefully acknowledges funding by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space in Germany, and the German State of Saxony-Anhalt.

