

# Report reveals issues what might turn women away from academic science

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Lack of mentoring and career support along with a low number of female role models have been cited as key factors that may be driving women in science to move away from academic careers earlier than men, according to a qualitative study published by the Wellcome Trust.

The report highlights several interventions that funders and institutions could implement to create an environment that is more supportive of both [women](#) and men who would prefer to stay in academia but are put off by misconceptions of what a successful academic career entails. Recommendations include better career support at the PhD stage, developing a flexible approach to careers in academia, and challenging some aspects of academic culture and working practices.

Professor Dame Kay Davies, Deputy Chairman of the Wellcome Trust, said: "For many women who leave [science](#), the decision is a positive choice to move on to a fulfilling career beyond academia. This report suggests, however, that some women of exceptional potential would prefer to continue in research but are leaving because of concerns about their working environment. It's clear that funders, universities and employers must address this in a coordinated way to ensure that we hold on to the brightest minds in science."

The study builds on the findings of the Wellcome Trust Basic Science Career Tracker, an annual survey that tracks the career destinations of selected cohorts of Wellcome Trust-funded researchers. The Career Tracker shows that women are leaving academia at a higher rate than

men, either immediately or shortly after completing their PhDs.

The qualitative study was carried out in autumn 2012 by Ipsos MORI, who conducted 59 in-depth telephone interviews and two online forums with women and men who had studied for a science PhD through one of the Wellcome Trust's Four-Year PhD Programmes.

The findings reveal that both men and women found a career in academia to be very rewarding but that there were risks associated with this, particularly during the first few years post-doctorate when researchers are trying to establish their careers. Both highlighted the difficulties of securing funding and the pressure to publish as major challenges to success in the early years of a postdoctoral research career.

Other aspects of academic culture, such as a culture of long working hours and the pressure to move institutions to be successful, seemed to act as a deterrent to both men and women but were seen by both genders to disadvantage women more.

Women also noted that the absence of female role models for aspiring researchers makes it difficult to visualise what a successful career could look like. They also cited a competitive environment and the need for self-promotion, in conflict with a philosophy that success should be based on merit, as significant factors in their decisions to leave.

The qualitative study also looked at participants' motivations for choosing a PhD in the first place. The majority of those interviewed were motivated to start a PhD by their passion for science. A small proportion specifically began a PhD because they wished to pursue an academic research career, and a few said that they started a PhD to facilitate a career outside of science. Most participants reported that at the start of their PhD studies they had a lack of awareness of the range of potential careers options open to them once they completed their

training.

Not surprisingly, those who had a positive PhD experience had a greater inclination to pursue a career in academic research. However, pursuit of a career in academia at this early [career](#) stage was described as being risky - too risky for some.

The Wellcome Trust Basic Science Career Tracker was launched in 2009, and the results of the fifth wave of the survey are anticipated in November 2013.

**More information:** Ipsos MORI. Risks and Rewards: How PhD students choose their careers. Wellcome Trust, London 2013.

[www.wellcome.ac.uk/stellent/gr ... cument/wtp053947.pdf](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/stellent/groups/academic/documents/wtp053947.pdf)

Provided by Wellcome Trust

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