



Check for updates



Growing through the cracks: Navigating global research funding cuts as an early career researcher

AUTHORS:

Carly Young¹
Tshepiso Mbangiwa²
Ian Mbano³

AFFILIATIONS:

¹South African Tuberculosis Vaccine Initiative, Division of Immunology, Department of Pathology and Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

²Vaccines for Africa Initiative (VACFA) and NITAG Support Hub (NISH), School of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

³Institute for Infectious Diseases and Molecular Medicine, Division of Immunology, Department of Pathology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Carly Young

EMAIL:

carly.young-baillie@uct.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:

Young C, Mbangiwa T, Mbano I. Growing through the cracks: Navigating global research funding cuts as an early career researcher. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(5/6), Art. #21941. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/21941>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

early career researchers, research funding, international partnerships, capacity strengthening, career development

PUBLISHED:

29 May 2025

Significance:

Some early career researchers (ECRs) in South Africa, as well as globally, are facing a moment of profound uncertainty following the recent global research funding cuts that threaten the continuity of health research. This Commentary reflects on the immediate and longer-term impacts of these disruptions from the perspective of affected ECRs, highlighting the emotional toll, institutional vulnerabilities, and potential loss of career momentum. It also outlines ECR-led strategies for resilience, including local collaboration, resource sharing and systemic reform. By centring the voices of emerging scientists, this piece underscores the urgent need to safeguard the future of research through sustainable, inclusive and diversified support systems.

A new uncertainty

When the news about the US funding cuts threatening South African health research was first publicised online, many researchers were unsure whether they were being click-baited or were facing another harsh reality. However, in a matter of days, conversations shifted from uncertainty to crisis. As early career researchers (ECRs) and postdoctoral fellows at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town (UCT), we understand, first-hand, how deeply intertwined our scientific work is with international partnerships, and how fragile those connections can become. As our academic and research host, UCT has long been a site of excellence and innovation – particularly in infectious diseases and clinical research – not just for our own people, but for the global scientific community. As ECRs, we face many obstacles, but few have felt as existential and uncertain as this one.

The immediate and longer-term impacts

In the days following the announcement, colleagues from collaborating research groups and neighbouring institutes began to halt key clinical activities linked to clinical trials and research, such as community engagement, participant recruitment, sample collection and participant follow-up. In dire instances, participants were cut off from accessing healthcare services they had come to rely on through various research initiatives. For the few research groups that have been unaffected until now, a fickle sense of hope still exists as we expect trickle-down effects at an institutional and organisational level. In fact, while drafting this piece, we received an email forewarning that retrenchments in some staff categories are inevitable. The first thought for ECRs is “Will we be the first to go?”.

For ECRs, fellowships and short-term contracts are the general norm, and we often string together multiple funding cycles to stay afloat. Without bigger, long-term funding pipelines or bridge-funding mechanisms, even a brief disruption can derail years of progress or drive talented researchers out of the field. As it stands, more prestigious funding mechanisms tend to favour more successful principal investigators with established track records. With the sudden withdrawal of key funding opportunities, the pot has been made even smaller for an already limited pool of long-term funding opportunities. Furthermore, we are also facing the threat of losing networking momentum and visibility. For ECRs, travelling for conference outputs, global networking and research visibility are key for recognition, future funding and building meaningful collaboration networks. We work to build our reputations one abstract, one talk and one poster at a time. Without funding to attend conferences or travel for fellowships, our momentum is under threat. For many ECRs, the window to fund new ideas and opportunities for visibility and recognition is inevitably narrowing.

A career in academia on our African continent is already fraught with challenges, not least because of the oversaturation of faculty positions in health sciences. This saturation leaves many ECRs feeling stuck, questioning their commitment to academia, and seeking alternatives in industry. However, a recent lived experience of an ECR who chose to transition from academia to industry in pursuit of stability and career growth demonstrates how this pivot is not without risks in the current climate. Merely days prior to starting their newly appointed position, the opportunity was rescinded, as the position was contingent on US governmental funding. Consequently, they were compelled to return to academia. This experience is a stark reminder of how the consequences of these funding cuts span from academia into industry. These cuts not only destabilise individual careers, but also hinder the broader progress of scientific initiatives across the continent, within academic and industry-led efforts.

The emotional toll

The ECR community is experiencing a shared fear of career derailment, with years of study, training and sacrifice dissolving into uncertainty. The pressure to produce, combined with uncertainty about the future and feeling invisible in broader institutional strategies, exerts a toll on one’s mental health. However, despite the distressed climate, ECRs are still showing up – not just for each other, but for the communities we serve. In the field of infectious diseases and clinical research, our work is deeply personal: we know what is at stake, and failure is not an option.

ECR-led solutions and resilience

African researchers have proven themselves, time and again, to be resilient and adaptable. In the short term, creative solutions like stopgap funding and resource sharing may help bridge the deficit. In the long term, we



must push to enhance local ownership, diversify funding streams and deepen institutional collaborations across Africa and beyond. This includes engaging with the private sector through innovative partnerships to support research-linked scholarships and fellowships in exchange for tax incentives, creating a mutually beneficial scenario that invests in local research talent while aligning corporate social responsibility goals. Such approaches can help anchor local research, reduce overreliance on foreign funding, and strengthen the pipeline of skilled scientists contributing to both academic and industry sectors. Exploring interdisciplinary, community-partnered research also offers an opportunity to further align our work with local priorities.

As ECRs, we have an opportunity to strengthen intra-African communities and peer-support networks for technical and emotional resilience. Creating open access knowledge banks for sharing protocols, data analysis codes and resource libraries offers an opportunity to democratise access. We ought to re-think project designs to maximise local infrastructure and reduce unnecessary dependency on any single source of international input to make our research more robust in the face of uncertainty. As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, funding interruptions and shifting global priorities can significantly impact local scientific output.¹ This is particularly true for African countries where scientists across disciplines with local priorities are at risk of losing their competitive edge and/or need to pivot their research when global agendas are shifted and international funds are diverted elsewhere.^{2,3} These outcomes demonstrate that diversification in funding sources and collaborative partnerships remains our best shield against both local and global disruptions and uncertainties.

Institutionally, ECRs need to be involved in strategic planning and crisis response, where ECR representation in decision-making for funding allocation, support planning and research direction will ensure research continuity. Institutional support for non-academic credentials or

certifications during funding lulls can ensure that we are proactive in our development, creating adaptable, future-proofed career paths.

Closing note

Being an ECR means learning to grow through the cracks – because our communities demand and deserve our perseverance. More importantly, the current crisis offers an opportunity to embrace the adage, “African solutions, by Africans, for Africans”. To the next generation of African scientists watching this moment unfold – may we see not only the cracks, but the rays of light shining through.

Acknowledgements

We thank our mentors Thomas Scriba, Edina Amponsah-Dacosta and Wendy Burgers for their support of early career researchers and for generously providing senior-level feedback on this piece.

Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

References

1. Umvilighozo G, Mupfumi L, Sonela N, Naicker D, Obuku EA, Koofhethile C, et al. Sub-Saharan Africa preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic: A perspective of early career African scientists. *Wellcome Open Res.* 2020;5, Art. #163. <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.16070.1>
2. Manderson L, Levine S. COVID-19 research and science infrastructure in South Africa. *S Afr J Sci.* 2023;119(7/8), Art. #16294. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2023/16294>
3. Moyo-Gwete T, Moore PL. Leveraging on past investment in understanding the immunology of COVID-19 – the South African experience. *S Afr J Sci.* 2022;118(5/6), Art. #13171. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2022/13171>