

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

Finding Joy in Academia

June 2026

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Project Overview

In these challenging times, social sciences researchers, particularly those at the early stages of their careers, are confronted with multiple pressures. It becomes increasingly important to pause and reflect on why us young researchers chose academia in the first place, what motivates us, and where we find sources of joy and inspiration along the way.

This is why, after consecrating a year to the topic of ‘Finding Joy’, the IMISCOE PhD Network Board decided to create a best practice guide to help early-career scholars find and nurture joy within academia. The IMISCOE PhD Network, which aims to strengthen research and networking opportunities for doctoral researchers in migration studies, is coordinated by its Board, whose members led the development of this guide.

We could not, however, do it alone. We thus asked our community of PhD researchers to share their thoughts and contribute to this collective resource designed to inspire others, showcasing what helps all of us to experience academia as a pleasant environment and how to turn downfalls into positivity.

An online survey, hosted on Google Sheet, was developed by a team of board members. Seven categories were identified to guide the drafting of both open-ended and close-ended questions:

1. Moments of Sunshine and Milestones
2. Daily Habits and Practices for Joy
3. Celebrating and Sharing Joy
4. Support Systems and Positivity in Community
5. Strategies for Resilience and Positivity During Challenges
6. Unconventional and Unexpected Joys
7. Visualizing and Reflecting on Joy

The call for contribution was shared among the entire IMISCOE PhD Network and on our social media platforms in late 2025. After two months, we collected 44 replies. Adding our own voices into the mix, we have been able to gather the experiences of close to 50 early-career researchers. This guide can be considered as the best of practices to find joy and meaning during a PhD journey. It also aims to provide a sense of camaraderie and to remind each and every one of us that we are not alone.

Participants' Profile

The vast majority of respondents are women (77%), while the remaining respondents are men (19%) and non-binary persons (4%). This is in line with global trends, which show women outnumber men in PhD completion since the early 2020s, particularly in social and human sciences.

Just over half (54%) of respondents are between 25 and 34 years old, challenging the idea that PhD researchers are fresh out of graduate school. Close to a third of people are between 35 and 44 years old, while the remaining people are between 45 and 54 years old. This indicates that a significant portion of our respondents may have worked outside of academia for some time before starting a PhD, or that they are further in their career. Indeed, most of the respondents are PhD students (77%) but four are postdoctoral researchers while two are assistant professors. The others include an independent scholar, a master graduate, a senior lecturer and a clinical-academic fellow. Most of the respondents have worked in academia between one and five years. The remaining respondents are evenly split: five have worked less than one year, four people between six and ten years, and five people over 10 years.

Table 1. Participants' demographic profile

	25-34 Y/O	35-44 Y/O	45-54 Y/O	55+ Y/O	TOTAL
♂	4	1	1	0	6
♀	16	10	4	1	31
* ♀	1	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	21	11	6	1	

Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

The majority of respondents (66%) work at institutions in Europe, which is illustrative of the greater IMISCOE community. Other institutions, however, show IMISCOE's reach is expanding, and include Peru, Australia, Pakistan, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, Thailand, India and the United States.

The most represented discipline is sociology (26%), followed by political sciences (19%) and law (12%). Three people work in anthropology, two in geography, two in demography, two in humanities, two in development studies and two in psychology. The other disciplines include cultural studies, health psychology, critical neuro-queer studies, history, social work and pediatrics. This illustrates how multidisciplinary migration studies truly are and

should encourage us to explore and collaborate with colleagues outside of our expertise areas.

While the low number of respondents does not permit us to generalize, we can note that the largest demographic group is composed of young PhD women. European institutions are overrepresented, although this might be explained by the channels used for distribution of the survey. Valuable insights can nevertheless be taken from the experiences of these researchers.

Motivations & Fulfilment

Academic careers are challenging and highly competitive. It is well known motivation plays a huge role in not only choosing the sector but also in pursuing a career in academia. Naturally, we wanted to understand what motivates researchers to enter and stay in such a field. Most respondents indicate that an interest to contributing to social change and a passion for research were their main motivation to pursue an academic career. Almost half of respondents also stated that intellectual freedom and autonomy, and the opportunity to work in an international environment motivated them in their choice. Clearly, respondents did not choose an academic career because of job security and stability, and few believe there was no alternatives. Researchers are curious individuals, driven by the belief that social change is possible through rigorous research. This certainly resonates with us.

Table 2. Motivation to pursue an academic career

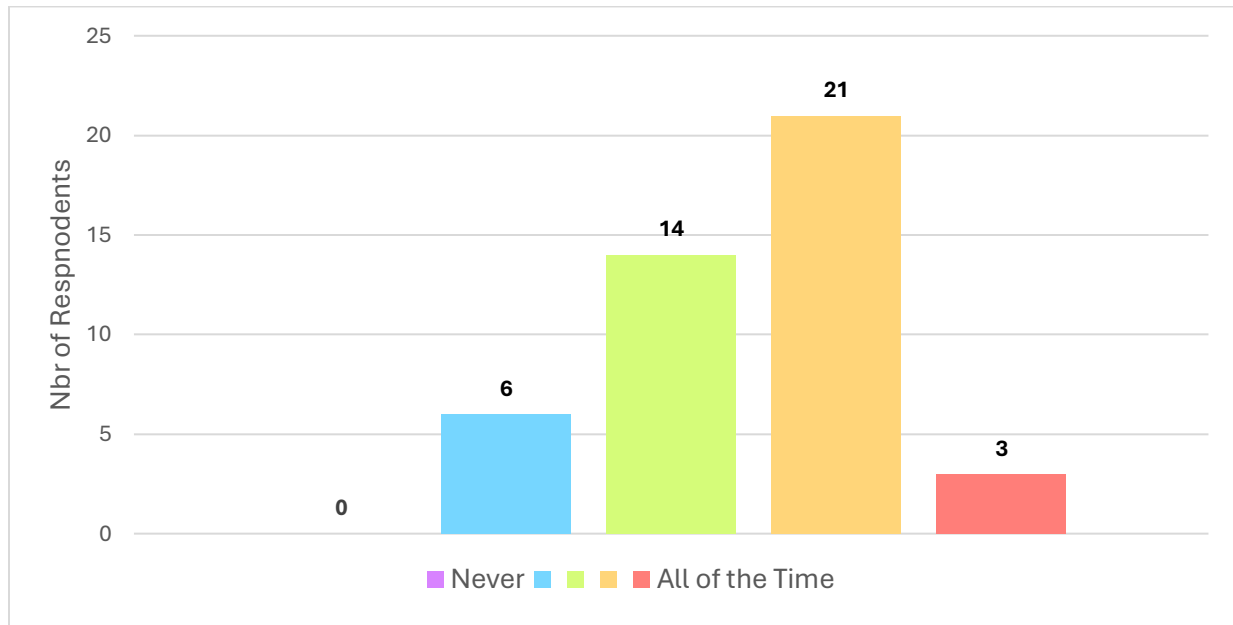
ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Interest to contributing to social change	30	24%
Passion for research	28	22%
Intellectual freedom and autonomy	21	17%
Opportunity to work in an international environment	18	14%
Desire to teach and mentor	12	10%
Inspired by a mentor or role model	7	6%
Lack of alternatives	5	4%
Job security and stability	3	2%
Others	1	1%

Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

Fulfilment in their academic career is a mixed bag for our respondents, with an average score of 3.48 out of 5. While no one never experiences some form of fulfilment from their

position, 13% of respondents indicated being rarely fulfilled. The remaining respondents do experience fulfilment most if not all of the time.

Graph 1. Fulfilment in academic work



Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

What does bring joy and fulfilment to our participants is first and foremost conducting research. Many also enjoy the autonomy and flexibility that comes with the job, as well as collaborating with peers. Perhaps surprisingly, teaching and supervising students does not provide a lot of joy to early-career researchers. This result might also stem from the fact that many young researchers do not have the time or the opportunity to learn how to teach others. Securing funding comes last, which we know that be a stressful and sometimes wasteful endeavour.

Table 3. Aspects of academic work which bring joy or fulfilment

ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Conducting research	37	24%
Autonomy/flexibility	26	17%
Collaborating with peers	25	16%
Presenting at conferences	19	12%
Writing and Publishing	18	12%
Teaching	15	10%
Supervising students	7	5%
Securing funding	7	5%
Others	1	1%

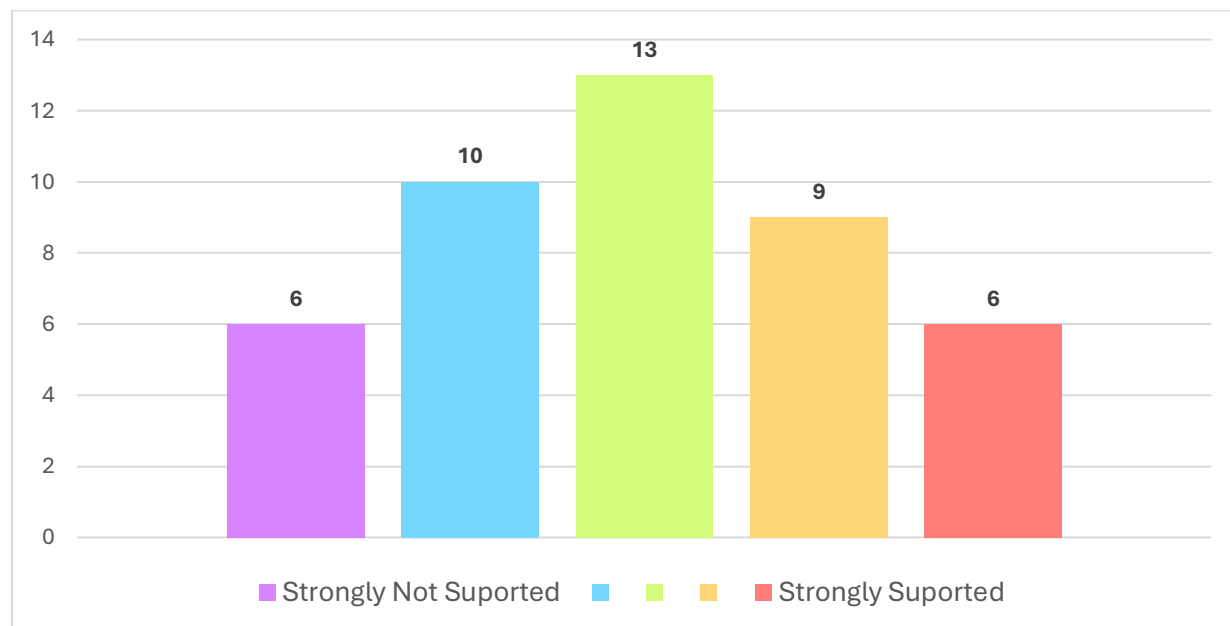
Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

Support Systems & Resilience

Academic life has increasingly been described as deeply isolating for many who pursue it; however, connection and the establishment of social ties among peers ultimately prove to be one of the antidotes to dissolve this feeling of isolation that many academics say they experience. When asked about the level of support they feel from their immediate academic environment, respondents gave a moderate average score of 2.98 out of 5, indicating that support within their institutional setting is uneven and, in many cases, insufficient.

Even so, not all situations are equally challenging. The data shows a wide variation across all levels. Whilst 14% of respondents feel strongly unsupported, another 14% feel strongly supported, with the majority falling somewhere in between. These figures suggest that the quality of the immediate academic environment varies significantly and that the factors explaining such variation are determined by the institution itself, the discipline, the supervisor, or even the country of employment.

Graph 2. Perception of support during PhD journey



Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

Outside formal institutional structures, respondents rely on a much richer network of support and relationships. When asked which support structures play a role in promoting and fostering their daily joy, the responses point to clear and consistent groups.

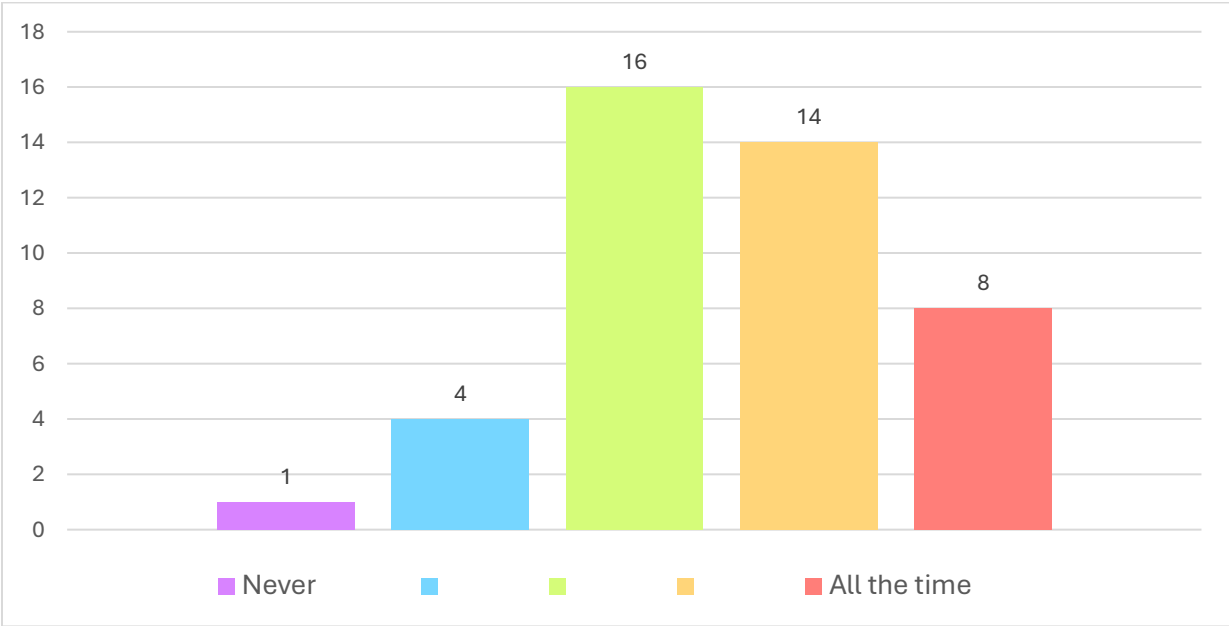
Colleagues and teammates, when present, came first, cited by 27 respondents, a testament to the value of peer solidarity in academic life. Family members followed closely behind with 19 mentions, and friends were cited 13 times. Supervisors and mentors, meanwhile, were mentioned 9 times, suggesting their relevance but highlighting a level of reliability lower than might be expected in this context. Furthermore, fieldwork relationships – whether with patients or research participants – were cited 3 times, and these mentions remind us that joy and connection can also arise within the actual communities and/or collectives that researchers study.

Furthermore, individual responses added nuance to the big picture. References to students, peer reading groups, online networks, and even cats and dogs were cited as significant sources of support. Notably, one respondent shared that they had no one to turn to for support, serving as a reminder that the isolation some experience is, unfortunately, real, and that no supervisor or network should assume that everyone has a support system.

An academic career inevitably brings its own share of setbacks and challenges. The issue is not whether setbacks exist, but rather how well researchers are prepared to deal with them. On average, respondents feel moderately overwhelmed by academic demands,

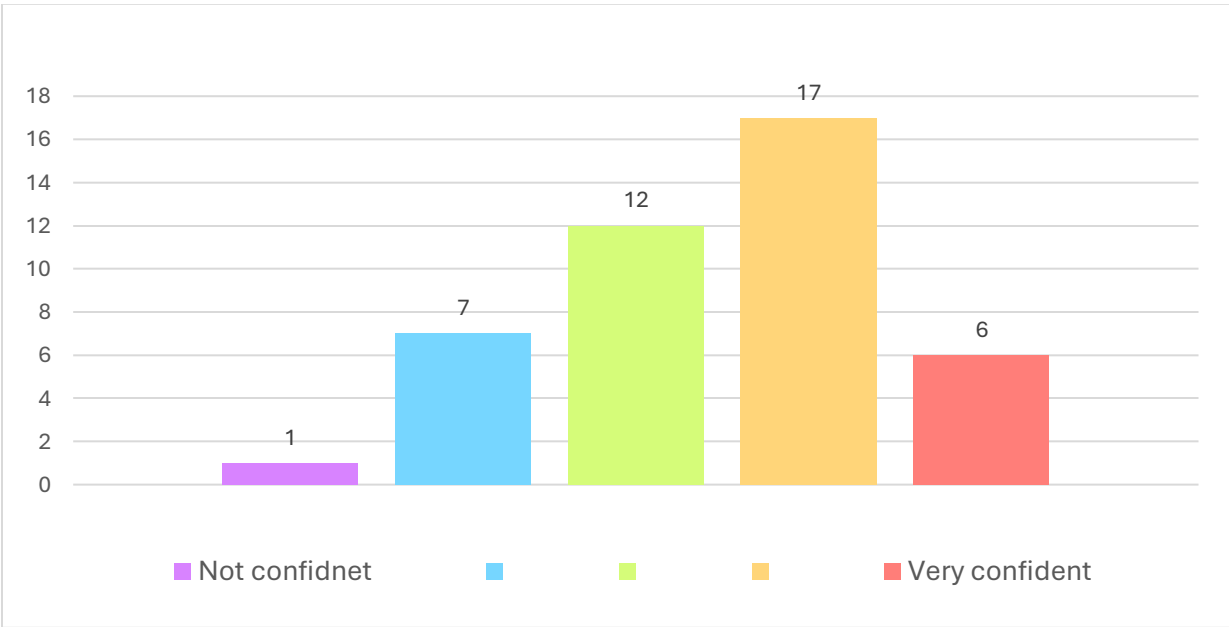
scoring an average of 3.56 out of 5, and show a moderate level of confidence in their ability to overcome setbacks, with an average of 3.47 out of 5.

Graph 3. Feeling overwhelmed by academic demand



Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

Graph 4. Confidence in ability to overcome academic setbacks



Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

With regard to how respondents effectively cope with situations of greater stress, the most common strategies are peer support and the routines they adopt individually. Peer and colleague support, with 35 mentions and accounting for around 28%, and personal routines, with 34 mentions representing 27%, emerge as the two dominant approaches, being virtually on par and, together, accounting for more than half of all responses. This dual finding is significant and suggests that both community-based practices and self-care practices are considered essential; however, neither is, in fact, sufficient on its own.

The boundaries between professional and personal life were cited by 20 respondents, representing 16%, followed by mentoring, cited 14 times and representing 11%, mental health support, mentioned 13 times and representing 10%, and finally, institutional support structures, cited by only 6 respondents and representing 5%.

The low figure for institutional support is noteworthy and indicates that most researchers do not feel they can rely on their institutions in times of great difficulty, and that informal and self-organised support structures bear the majority of the burden in these situations.

Table 4. How the respondents deal with academic challenges

ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Support from peers/colleagues	35	28%
Personal routines	34	27%
Work-life boundaries	20	16%
Mentorship	14	11%
Mental health support	13	10%
Institutional support structures	6	5%
Others	4	3%

Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

As for the major setbacks or challenges identified, the responses fell into four broad thematic areas. Firstly, institutional and financial pressures were widely and frequently mentioned, with precarious working conditions, excessive bureaucracy and the difficulty in dealing with ethical approvals being some of the factors that early-career researchers report encountering in their work.

Next, relational and supervisory difficulties constituted a second major theme, with many respondents describing the stress they felt due to a lack of guidance or support from supervisors and, in severe cases, the openly hostile supervision they experienced, including instances of humiliation. In this regard, the relationship with the supervisor, when positive, can be transformative; however, when it is not, the damage to motivation and well-being can be severe.

Thirdly, workload and well-being emerged as a significant theme, with cases of burnout mentioned repeatedly. Respondents describe impossible deadlines, the challenge of balancing parenthood and academic work, and the particular difficulty faced by academic migrants lacking a local support network as some of the challenges that jeopardise individual well-being.

Finally, rejection and insecurity complete the range of challenges experienced. The constant cycle of submitting and being rejected, whether for articles, funding, or positions, takes a toll on the researcher. Many described the long process of regaining confidence in themselves and their work after each rejection. The cumulative effect of rejection is often underestimated in academic culture, which tends to normalise rejection without providing adequate support for those who experience it constantly.

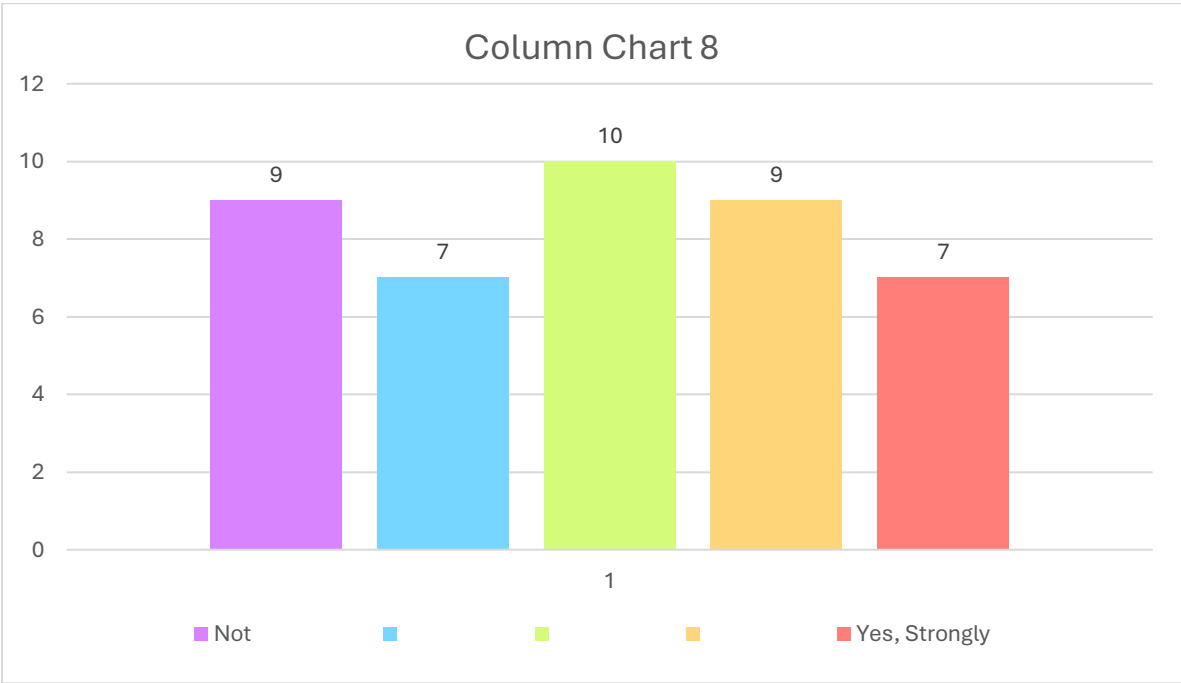
The IMISCOE Community Cluster

According to our understanding, IMISCOE is one of Europe's largest research networks in the field of migration studies, bringing together academics from numerous institutions across several continents. Within it, the PhD Network exists specifically to enhance research and networking opportunities for doctoral researchers, standing out as a peer community that understands the specific pressures and rewards of early-career academic life.

As such, for many respondents, these types of communities are essential not only professionally but also personally. As described in the previous sections of this guide, peer support emerges as the most frequently cited coping strategy among early-career researchers. Consequently, a network such as IMISCOE is precisely a structure that facilitates connections between peers, transcending distances, disciplines, and institutional contexts.

The data, however, invite us to engage with some honest reflection. When asked about the intensity with which they feel a sense of community within IMISCOE, respondents gave an average score of 2.95 out of 5, slightly below the midpoint, suggesting that the network's potential as a source of belonging has not yet been fully realised for early-career researchers in this field.

Graph 5. Sense of community within IMISCOE



Source: IMISCOE PhD Joy Survey, 2025.

The distribution of responses reveals a nuanced picture. Around 21% of respondents reported feeling no sense of community, whilst 17% stated they felt strongly connected. The remaining majority fall somewhere in the middle, with the most common responses clustering around the midpoint. In other words, IMISCOE is a network that many are familiar with and to which they may or may not be connected, but which relatively few experience as a true community to which they belong.

Such a gap is not unique to IMISCOE. Large academic networks face a structural challenge between being part of a network and feeling part of a community. Furthermore, the larger and more geographically dispersed they are, the more difficult it becomes to generate the kind of intimacy and trust that makes the sense of community feel real. Conferences help, but they are infrequent and not equally accessible. Online platforms connect people but rarely replicate the quality of face-to-face interaction.

What the data suggests is that there is a genuine desire for something deeper. The practical advice gathered in the following section echoes these desires, as respondents called for more humanised interactions with established academics, decentralised in-person events, and personal support for aspects that large networks often assume members already know.

Fundamentally, community and joy are not issues that should be dealt with in silos. Respondents to our survey made it clear, time and again, that joy in academic life is relational and is found in moments such as sharing drafts with colleagues, celebrating small victories with peers, or learning from the failures of those they admire.

As such, a network that fosters this kind of connection is not only useful on a professional level but also becomes a significant contributor to the well-being of its members and the community.

What IMISCOE Already Offers

We thus asked ourselves: *what can we do to contribute to this sense of community and inspire joy within the IMISCOE network?* and you answered. The responses to our survey suggest two overlapping clusters including community and opportunities as efforts for IMISCOE to facilitate joy within the network.

IMISCOE should create a space which serves as a community that fosters a sense of belonging by consolidating on existing frameworks and structures, while exploring new options. It was, for instance, suggested that IMISCOE leverages social media platforms by creating groups where researchers with similar interests can meet to share experiences, encourage, inspire and support each other.

💡 Well, did you know? There is a plethora of LinkedIn pages for every and any group within the IMISCOE community. Click below to explore 🖱️

- [PhD Network](#)
- [SC Education and Social Inequality](#)
- [SC Families, Welfare, Care and The Life Course](#)
- [SC Forced Migration and Refugees](#)
- [SC Gender and Sexuality in Migration Research](#)
- [SC Migrant Transnationalism](#)
- [SC Migration, Migrants and Labour Markets](#)
- [SC Migration Politics and Governance](#)
- [SC Race, Racism and Discrimination](#)
- [SC Reflexivities in Migration Studies](#)
- [SC Arts, Culture and Migration](#)

Deliberate efforts should be made by IMISCOE to enhance interpersonal relationships among researchers. This can be done through seminars, webinars, coffee chats, podcasts, and other live activities with formal and informal approaches, and participation from experts

in migration research and related activities. Priority should also be given to spaces for sharing resources, knowledge, achievements, challenges and possible solutions.

💡 Well, did you know? Outside of the spring and annual conferences, the IMISCOE PhD network, standing committees and other groups regularly organise online activities. Here are a few suggestions, but the IMISCOE website is always the best place to look for more!

- [PhD Network coffee chats](#)
- [IMISCOE Migration Podcast](#)
- [Joy in Academia Podcast](#)
- [Member Institutes' webinars](#)

The activities of IMISCOE need to be expanded to members in different countries or regions to overcome spatial barriers, with particular attention to researchers from underrepresented and underserved institution and regions. Attention should be given to interactive in-person activities across regional or national centres/units.

💡 Well, did you know? IMISCOE has launched a new type of events, the [Regional Forum!](#) The 2026 edition will take place in Morocco and focus on migration and mobility through the Mediterranean. If this first edition is a success, this Regional Forum will travel across the globe.

There should be a platform of mentoring programme between early-career researchers and established scholars of migration. This will enhance a smooth research trajectory, research output, and provide guidance for career choices in academia. The focus should be on practical skill-acquisition activities such as research publication, overcoming imposter syndrome, application for conferences, presentation at conferences. The mentoring programme should include in-person and online sessions and workshops.

💡 Well, did you know? The PhD Network has decided to focus on skill training activities as of the academic year 2026-2027, so make sure to subscribe to our newsletter for updates and news about events. You can do so by becoming a member over here

👉 [Become a member](#)

The network should actively involve early-career migration researchers in its events and encourage active participation of migration students in migration research related activities to expand their network. It should also adopt multilingual approach in its activities.

💡 Well, did you know? The 2026 Spring Conference tested this model by making PhD researchers chair panels and plenary sessions. Live translation between French and English

was also available for all plenary sessions. Next? Sessions in Spanish during the 2026 Annual Conference.

Early-career researchers should be trusted, encouraged, and supported in their efforts to communicate research and generate new knowledge. This support could take the form of special journal issues that showcase and publish their work.

💡 Well, did you know? In 2025, the PhD network's blog published a [special issue](#) featuring PhD researchers. The group will also give the opportunity to young researchers and scholars to share their work in the upcoming academic year.

But we still have work to do, as some additional suggestions highlight below 📌

The network should communicate developments in migration research. This will enable migration scholars to identify emerging trends in migration research, thereby guiding their research trajectories. Opportunities and resources for migration researchers should also be communicated through its channels.

The network should consider providing financial support through funding and sponsorship to researchers from underserved and underrepresented backgrounds, with emphasis on scholarships, conference attendance, publications, creative events, fellowships.

The network should develop a talent hub, where early-career researchers will draw inspiration for the various skills they could acquire to enhance their employability beyond the academia and research field, while acknowledging achievements beyond publications.

The network should develop frameworks for voluntary auxiliary supervisors for migration researchers from underserved societies to leverage on, to overcome the setbacks arising from industrial actions and skills mismatch among primary institutional supervisors.

Best Practices in Practice

🌟 Seek out supportive and encouraging communities. Build relationships with peers, mentors, and colleagues who share your interests and values. Celebrate achievements together, offer support during challenges, and create opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

🌟 Make time for activities beyond research. Creative, social, and recreational pursuits such as exercise, sports, cooking, arts, travel, volunteering, or spending time with friends can provide balance and contribute to long-term wellbeing.

✨ Online communities can also be valuable sources of advice, mentorship, and encouragement. Engage with professional networks, newsletters, discussion groups, and social media communities that support your development.

✨ Do not hesitate to seek help when needed. Support can come from supervisors, peers, institutional services, professional associations, and communities beyond academia.

Wellbeing

- ☺ Prioritise your physical and mental health.
- ☺ Seek professional support when needed.
- ☺ Maintain healthy habits, including regular exercise, adequate sleep, time outdoors, and a balanced diet.
- ☺ Take breaks and allow yourself time to rest and recover from demanding periods of work.
- ☺ Set realistic goals and avoid comparing your progress to that of others.
- ☺ Recognise your limits and work at a pace that is sustainable.
- ☺ Reflect regularly on whether your current approach is serving your personal and professional goals.
- ☺ When something is not working, be willing to adjust your methods, redefine your goals, or explore new directions.
- ☺ Cultivate resilience by celebrating progress, learning from setbacks, and maintaining perspective during difficult periods.

Research

✨ Be confident and passionate about your research. Early-career researchers should strive to find aspects of their work that genuinely interest and motivate them. Connecting research to personal values, intellectual curiosity, or societal impact can make challenges more manageable and the research process more rewarding.

✨ Seek mentors and role models who are available to guide you through your research work. Attending academic events is relevant to expanding academic network and finding opportunities for collaboration.

Career Development

- ☺ Explore a range of career options both within and beyond academia.
- ☺ Develop transferable skills such as communication, project management, leadership, teaching, and teamwork.
- ☺ Seek opportunities to gain experience outside your immediate research activities.

- Build a professional network through conferences, workshops, and professional associations.
- Consider how your research expertise can contribute to society, industry, policy, or other sectors.
- Remain open to evolving career goals as your interests and opportunities develop.

The responses suggest that while individual actions can help early-career researchers cultivate joy and fulfilment, responsibility does not rest with researchers alone. Supportive institutional cultures, accessible resources, effective mentorship, and healthy working environments are equally important. Therefore, universities and research organisations should actively create conditions that enable early-career researchers to thrive, rather than expecting individuals to navigate these challenges entirely on their own.

But in the End, What is Joy?

Well, according to you...

Create from love, trust your creative process because you are making it happen.

A scientist never simply believes – they question, explore, measure, and try again.

My younger self would be proud.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Solidarity is the empowerment that lift you up and does not leave anyone alone or behind.

The best of me is yet to come.

Just keep swimming.

NOTE TO EACH OF US

we have all our lives ahead.

Do what you're passionate about.

You are more than enough. Believe in yourself because nobody is like you!

The perfect research does not exist. Aiming at what is good enough is enough. You are worthy.

Keep your eye on the big picture. The small things will sort themselves out.

"The expert in anything was once a beginner."
– Helen Hayes

One day at a time.

Curiosity over perfection.

Be kind to yourself and others.

IMISCOE
PHD NETWORK