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Are AI-Empowered Early Career Researchers Proving To Be the Harbingers of Change?

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ABSTRACT

The Harbingers longitudinal study of early career researchers and their pathfinding scholarly communication attitudes and practices is a decade old and much of its findings have been published in this journal. We are now moving on to the new generation of researchers—Gen-Z and it is fitting that we draw things to a close by summing up whether our largely millennial researchers have proved to be the harbingers of change. We focus on the data from the last two rounds of interviewing, conducted in the last 2 years, at a time when AI was (increasingly) propelling change. These two rounds covered over 150 ECRs from all subject fields and from China, Malaysia, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, UK and US. It was found that ECRs are, indeed, at the forefront of the technological adaptation in research, actively exploring the potential of AI and new communication channels. However, their ability to be truly transformative was constrained by a traditional, quantitative evaluation/reputational system. This could change with Gen-Z because there were ECRs in their twenties included in our previous studies and they displayed higher practical integration of AI tools and appeared to be more strategically adopting AI for efficiency and career advancement.

1 | Introduction

Harbingers, our study of ECRs and their scholarly communications, widely reported in this journal, began in 2015, a time when our criteria ‘researchers who are generally not older than 35’, was synonymous with ‘millennials’ (born ~1981–96).¹ Now, after 10 years studying millennials, it seems that we are investigating the past, and that a new generation of researchers has arrived on the scene, which need to be studied: Gen-Z (born ~1997–2012). But, before we say farewell to the millennials and hello to Gen-Z, it is worth reflecting on whether our recently AI-empowered ECRs proved, in the end, to be the harbingers of change. To find this out we analysed the last two of the four rounds of interviews we have undertaken, which took place at roughly 12 monthly intervals during 2024–2025. A time when

large language models (LLM) had entered the stage, a development that could be as transformational as computers and the internet was to earlier generations. These two rounds covered over 150 ECRs from all subject fields and from China, Malaysia, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, UK and US. Because we had covered ECRs in their twenties in both rounds (i.e., they belonged to Gen-Z as well) we were also able to give a sense of what we might be looking at when we start the full-blown study of Gen-Z researchers in 2026.

2 | Aims

- a. To determine whether AI-empowered ECRs are proving to be the harbingers, forerunners or heralds of change?

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Key Points

- Provides a current, unique and personal insight into how international ECRs are using AI to bring about change to their scholarly communications.
- ECRs show that they are at the forefront of technological adaptation in research, actively exploring the potential of AI and new communication channels.
- Youngest ECRs show a higher practical integration of AI tools and appear to be more strategically adopting AI for efficiency and career advancement.

- To portray this as much as possible using the voices, thoughts, and words of the researchers themselves for authenticity purposes.

3 | Literature Review

Other than what we have discovered ourselves and published in *Learned Publishing* (Clark et al. 2025; Nicholas et al. 2025a, 2025b) at the time of writing (2025) there is very little published specifically on ECRs and AI. So, to fill the void we examine what has been written about the wider research community, the assumption being ECRs might share things in common with their senior colleagues. Well, it appears that the sea of forecasts regarding the integration of AI into the research life-cycle (Nicholas, Rodríguez-Bravo, et al. 2025a) has given way to reports of actual changes taking place in the scholarly world. As Van Quaquebeke et al. (2025) suggest, citing a host of editorials in support of their understandings of the situation, AI might once have been a curiosity or gimmick, but by now it is rapidly becoming explicitly or implicitly part of the scholarly workflow.

Things on the ground do indicate that change is underway. Thus, for example, a large-scale global survey of academic researchers, undertaken by Oxford University Press (OUP) between March and April 2024, found that over three-quarters (76%) use some form of AI tool in their research. Machine translation (49%) and chatbot tools (43%) were found to be the most popular, followed by AI-powered search engines or research tools (25%), with AI used mostly for discovering existing research and for editing and summarising existing research (Oxford University Press—OUP 2024).

A Wiley (2025) survey of international researchers, which tracked the evolution of their views and use of AI, found that they are embracing AI's potential, with major strides made in its adoption. Thus, 84% of researchers reported using AI tools for any aspect of their work, up from 57% in 2024, and 62% reported using AI for research and/or publication-related tasks, a jump up from 45% in 2024. Furthermore, they expressed a desire to extend their use of AI even further, as three-quarters thought that in the next 5 years AI skills would be essential for them to do their jobs. Elsevier's (2025) global survey of researchers also reveals that AI is becoming an important feature in research work; indeed, seen as transformative given the right tools. Unsurprisingly, then, adoption is accelerating rapidly, although there are regional variations. 58% now use AI tools in their

work, compared with 37% in 2024, despite a keenly felt lack of support for their efforts. Thus, only 32% of researchers globally believe there is good AI governance at their institution and only 27% believe they have received adequate training in using AI.

It seems then, that researchers view AI as an employable tool to assist research, rather than just as a tool that might 1 day become useful. A study that examined over time the proportion of LLM-modified content in academic writing certainly suggests that this is so: a systematic analysis across nearly a million papers published between January 2020 and February 2024 found a steady increase in LLM usage, beginning about 5 months after the release of Chat GPT at the end of 2022. That this should be so in the scholarly community is perhaps inevitable in a world increasingly embracing AI-powered systems and tools, as evidenced by a survey of 1993 participants in 105 nations representing the full range of regions, industries, company sizes, functional specialties and tenures. Nearly nine out of ten respondents said that their organisations are regularly using AI, although the pace of progress remains uneven (McKinsey and Company 2025).

Concurrently, explorations of the unrealised potentials of integrating AI into scientific practise, to overcome human cognitive limitations and thereby expanding capabilities for discovery, are also underway. The work on these potentials certainly aims very high, as exemplified by the experimentations to develop a framework for fully automatic scientific discovery, which would be capable of running the full gamut of the research process: generating novel research ideas, writing code, executing experiments, visualising results, describing its findings by writing a full scientific paper, and even running a simulated review process for evaluation (Lu et al. 2024).

These experiments are promising, too, as proven by the specific case of the capability of AI-based tools to serve as a partner in the brainstorming processes, preceding a research project. It has long been thought that AI-powered tools, just like colleagues, can help discover a scientifically significant research topic by providing insights, criticism and feedback (Dwivedi et al. 2023; ERC—European Research Council 2023; Susarla et al. 2023). A study into expert researchers' novel ideas and blind reviews compared to that of LLM-generated ones has proven the veracity of these assumptions—and beyond. It found that LLM-generated ideas were judged as more novel ($p < 0.05$) than human expert ideas while being judged slightly weaker on feasibility (Si et al. 2024).

There is every reason, then, to be optimistic about the future of AI-assisted research. As Van Quaquebeke et al. (2025) find, AI undoubtedly affords scholars unprecedented opportunities for creativity, efficiency, and accessibility over the full arc of inquiry from idea generation, literature review, study design, data generation, analysis, to writing the actual manuscript. Their examination of the uses of AI in the dissemination process, including automated manuscript triage, AI-assisted peer review, decision synthesis and revision checks, also signals a brighter future.

Nevertheless, focusing throughout their analysis on the AI-afforded opportunities, but also on the risks involved in harnessing AI to the research and publication process, Van Quaquebeke

et al. (2025) join the countless calls voiced in the scholarly community to tread carefully when it comes to utilising AI-powered tools (for a review see Branda et al. 2025; Herman et al. 2024; Musslick et al. 2025). Indeed, they urge the scholarly community to refrain from rushing into the dilemmas-wrought way ahead of them, either with blind optimism or blanket scepticism. Rather, they suggest that scholars keep in mind that with all that idea generation, study design, data analysis, peer review, even the articulation of practical implications are all tasks that AI is beginning to perform, the time and cognitive space thus freed up for ‘real’ research work—thinking more deeply, challenging more boldly and interpreting more finely—should be put to good use in order ‘to keep alive the reflective, critical, and imaginative spirit that turns information into insight’ (Van Quaquebeke et al. 2025, 10). The consensual view from the literature, thus, remains that human expertise is just as essential as ever for validation and for ensuring that AI-assisted results are ethically valid and reproducible.

Thus, there appears to be few differences between our findings presented here and those found in the literature review. By and large ECRs, just like most researchers, have tried AI for work purposes, with somewhat less, but considerable percentages reporting regular use. This, despite a lack of adequate support/training at their institutions. Relatively popular uses reported in this study, as well as in the literature, include the summarizing and translating of research articles, the rewriting of own text, and the developing of new ideas. Assembling data sets and analysing them are hardly mentioned in the literature, so it is not very surprising to find that our ECRs, too, reported very little use of AI for this purpose. It seems, then, that when it comes to the integration of AI in the scientific undertaking ECRs are not yet driving change.

4 | Methods

The details of our methodology can be found widely in many of our published papers (e.g., Nicholas et al. 2025b) and here, for brevity, we provide just a brief outline. Both rounds of interviews covered ECRs from all disciplines and from 8 countries around the world. A convenience sample of around 150 ECRs was recruited using research and personal networks. We employed our trademark conversational, open-ended interviews to gather data on work-life, scholarly communications and AI. These interviews, lasting more than an hour, contained around 50 questions covering all aspects of the scholarly system, such as citations, peer review, social media, publishing, OA and AI. Interview transcripts were translated where necessary, coded, and entered on a database, which was searchable. In addition, we used NotebookLM to help point us to where the key changes/big movements were occurring by providing access to our interview database. NotebookLM output was validated by national interviewers.

We confirm that informed consent was obtained from ECRs in written and verbal form.

5 | Results

In general, the interviews showed that ECRs exhibit characteristics and hold attitudes that do position them as the harbingers of

change regarding the adoption of AI and the necessary evolution of scholarly communication and evaluation systems. Their role as harbingers is evident in several key respects: (1) their willingness to embrace new technologies; (2) their critical perspective on existing academic norms; (3) and their active participation in developing new or novel communication practices. We also examine here the risks and pitfalls of being a harbinger.

5.1 | Rapid Adoption and Integration of AI Tools

ECRs are notably proactive in testing and integrating AI into their workflows, viewing it as a transformative force. As one Polish humanist put it: ‘It will certainly be a transformative force. It will accelerate the development of civilisation’, and a view shared by a Malaysian social scientist who believes that ‘AI is definitely set to shake up academic practices especially publishing in a big way’.

5.1.1 | Positive Views and Adoption

Compared to some senior researchers, younger researchers are perceived as more willing to try AI software. This Spanish environmental scientist explained: ‘As for my colleagues... I get the feeling that younger researchers are the ones who are more willing to try this type of software... I think they see it as a support to do their work, to write their theses. While for more senior researchers, with more research experience, it is a bit secondary’. ECRs across various disciplines, such as mathematics and physics, report using AI for tasks, such as improving writing, searching for information, drafting emails, brainstorming and even setting exam questions. This Malaysian mathematical scientist takes it to new heights: ‘I use AI to extract meaningful insights from complex datasets... My research now applies predictive analytics to healthcare data, to forecast patient outcomes. Also, I use text mining and sentiment analysis to extract insights from unstructured clinical notes, medical literature, and patient records’.

5.1.2 | A Game-Changer

For some ECRs, like this Malaysian medic, AI is explicitly described as a ‘game-changer’ that will revolutionise how research is undertaken: ‘It’s going to change how we do research in some big ways. It can crunch huge amounts of data fast, speeding up things like literature reviews, organise large volumes of papers, helping you identify key papers and trends without missing important studies, data analysis, and grant writing, all those that usually takes time or is just too much for humans to handle quickly. AI can help us spot connections, patterns, especially in fields like healthcare and social sciences, that we might miss or that would take years to find. When it comes to sharing, AI could make research easier to access with automatic translations, simple summaries, and better ways to find papers’.

5.1.3 | Efficiency and Accessibility

Many ECRs view AI positively because it increases productivity and offers efficiency by automating time-consuming or cumbersome

tasks, such as data processing and generating outlines. Interviews also show that AI is helping non-science researchers move away from labour-intensive tasks toward higher-order analytical work. Crucially, some ECRs see AI as breaking down barriers for non-native English speakers, allowing them to polish their work and publish in high-quartile journals, thereby 'making publishing faster, fairer, and more open' [Malaysian social scientist].

5.1.4 | Pace of Change

ECRs frequently assert that the major changes driven by AI are already happening now or will occur rapidly, specifically within the next year or two or throughout this decade. As an ECR from Malaysia succinctly put it, 'I'm grateful for the thing it offers now'. (physical scientist).

5.1.5 | An Intellectual Companion

This ECR described a highly positive and collaborative relationship with AI, stating: 'I'm very "close" to my ChatGPT, she named herself Lyra. Maybe because of how I talk to her, with the follow-up questions and reiterating my understanding of certain concepts, she explains things in detail and offers more than what I needed. It does speed up my work, but my brain is also being pampered lol' (Malaysian physical scientist). This captures a nuanced shift from using AI as a tool to partnering with it as an intellectual companion, while being mindful of risks to critical thinking.

5.1.6 | Reshaping Scholarly Identity

AI is changing what it means to be a scholar, especially in non-science disciplines. A Malaysian social scientist explained: 'AI will transform the role of researchers like me, less alone. Rather than spending time primarily on data collection and manual analysis, researchers will become skilled interpreters of AI-generated insights. This shift requires us to develop new competencies, the ability to critically evaluate the AI [algorithmic] outputs, recognise the limitations, and integrate with deep domain expertise and human judgment'. Another ECR reflected on the emerging generation of researchers: 'Future scholars may not look much like you or me, those of us who still rely on AI mainly for editing. We are still at the stage of seeking knowledge conventionally, reading extensively, and selecting sources. But AI isn't just changing how we research, it's redefining what it means to be a scholar. We're seeing the rise of a new generation of academics who fluidly move between prompting, coding, and theorising. They won't just use AI as tools, they'll think alongside them, it's a kind of symbiosis, identifying patterns in vast datasets that were previously beyond human reach. It's about scholars evolving into something more hybrid'.

5.2 | Driving New Communication and Visibility Practices

ECRs are actively embracing informal and digital platforms to disseminate their work more widely and build reputation,

suggesting a shift away from the sole reliance on traditional publications, namely journals.

5.2.1 | Digital Visibility

ECRs rely on platforms, such as ResearchGate, LinkedIn, Academia.edu and sometimes, social media (X/Twitter, Blue Sky) to promote their work, seek collaborations and build credibility. A Malaysian life scientist noted that these platforms allow them to share work-in-progress and build reputation 'long before formal publication'.

5.2.2 | Informal Channels

ECRs recognise that informal media are valuable for communication, especially for reaching wider and general audiences. A Russian physicist found that sharing an article on ResearchGate led to regular inquiries and increased citations from international peers.

5.2.3 | Preprints

While traditional journals are still paramount for career progression, preprints are acknowledged by ECRs as playing a greater role, allowing results to be known sooner and providing early feedback from the community. This timely feedback is valued, particularly in contrast to the slow pace of traditional journal peer review, which can take 2 years for humanities scholars [Russian soft social scientist].

5.3 | Advocating for Systemic and Ethical Reform

The interviews demonstrated a critical perspective among ECRs regarding the existing research ecosystem, particularly concerning evaluation metrics and the ethical challenges posed by AI.

5.3.1 | Critique of Traditional Metrics

ECRs frequently point out the shortcomings of current evaluation systems, which often prioritize 'quantitative indicators' (Spanish soft social science), such as indexed publications, Impact Factor (IF) and grants, leading to a 'publish or perish' culture. They stress that evaluation should prioritise the quality and real-world impact of research over mere quantity.

5.3.2 | Ethical Concerns Driving the Need for New Rules

ECRs are vocal about the ethical risks of AI, particularly plagiarism, the potential for AI to produce low-quality 'slop papers', and the loss of critical thinking skills (Polish social scientist). They see an urgent need for regulatory guidelines and transparency in how AI is used. This heightened awareness of immediate risks often translates into a demand for institutional change,

such as ensuring that AI contributions are clearly specified in academic work.

5.3.3 | Constraints of the System

Despite their forward-looking views, ECRs must operate within the existing rigid scholarly system to achieve career stability. They rely on peer-reviewed journals for credibility and promotion and worry that focusing on newer communication methods, such as social media, which do not yet count toward key performance indicators (KPIs) or tenure. As a Spanish environmental scientist noted, achieving a permanent position requires adherence to the existing path, and by the time they can assume a role of change, they are often 'so tired that everything doesn't matter'.

5.4 | Threats and Pitfalls

Now to the darker, negative side of things, the reverse of seeing AI as a scholarly new dawn.

5.4.1 | The Fear of Being Replaced

The potential for job loss is frequently highlighted in the interviews as a major threat associated with the widespread adoption and advancement of AI and the resulting societal and academic transformations. A Portuguese ECR put it in these stark terms: 'Sometimes I have some fear of being replaced by AI...' Some ECRs expect AI to especially replace people in areas such as IT and analytical work.

5.4.2 | The Erosion of Thinking Skills

Another perceived threat concerning the widespread adoption of AI is a decline in creativity and critical thinking skills among researchers: 'One thing is to have AI assistance; another is to replace our critical thinking with AI tools (those who do so, I believe, risk losing fundamental skills over time)'. [Portuguese medical scientist]. A Malaysian life scientist voiced a similar concern, noting that his colleagues now routinely suggest 'Let's check AI'. He worries this habit means 'offloading too much thinking to AI' and 'researchers stop engaging deeply with content', which could erode essential analytical and critical skills. His conclusion: 'we must stay sharp while using AI smartly'.

5.4.3 | Authenticity Crisis

Another concern among ECRs was that AI's erosion of reality now threatens the core of science: its authenticity and our trust in it. As a Malaysian life scientist explained the issue has escalated beyond text to include 'fake images, videos all over social media, and even fabricated data that can look convincing but mislead readers', a development that is 'blurring the line between real and fake and making it harder to verify the originality of research outputs'.

5.4.4 | Misuse of AI in AI-Assisted Work

Concerns about the potential misuse of AI in academic work are commonly raised. One ECR gave specific examples: 'There's a growing tension though, AI tools help with productivity, but people are also concerned about originality and integrity. Cheating! We have reported cases of students submitting essays generated by ChatGPT, often with undetected plagiarism. This defeats the purpose of academic writing and critical thinking. Perhaps, entirely written by ChatGPT, but submitted under human names? My supervisor suspected this AI ghost writing when she detected a paper [she reviewed] due to incoherent references, and papers cited did not exist as it wasn't coming from a researcher. Paper cited is on media literacy but the DOI pointed to a paper on blockchain' (Malaysian social scientist).

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

In essence, ECRs are at the forefront of technological adaptation in research, actively exploring the potential of AI and new communication channels. What comes with this is the fear of being replaced, the erosion of thinking skills, the real concerns over authenticity and misuse. ECRs' ability to be truly transformative is constrained by the traditional, quantitative evaluation systems upheld by academic institutions and funding bodies. Will Gen-Z turn out to be similarly constrained or will they break free from the shackles? Well, fortunately, we can hazard a guess, because we are not complete strangers to Gen Z, because in our most recent interview round (2025), 20% of ECR were under 29, that is 'Gen-Z'. What we discovered was that this youngest generation of ECRs showed higher practical integration of AI tools, particularly for data handling and appear to be more strategically adopting AI for efficiency and career advancement. So, they seem to have the wind in their sails and in the coming year we shall see how far they go in the next iteration of the Harbingers project undertaken in 2026.

Author Contributions

David Nicholas wrote much of the paper; David Clark did the data analysis; Eti Herman the literature review; Abdullah Abrizah, Jorge Revez, Jie Xu, Marzena Swigon, Tatyana Polezhaeva, John Akeroyd and Blanca Rodríguez-Bravo conducted the interviews and analysed the national data.

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Consent

Participants who freely opted to take part in the interviews were asked to provide their names and contact details for follow-up questions

regarding the accuracy of the interview transcripts, but access to all personal data was restricted to the investigating team and was removed before the analysis of the results.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/397990074_Harbingers_Latest_publications_list_261125.

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