

## RESEARCH PATTERNS ON EARLY CAREER: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

Ummu Athilia Kamal<sup>1\*</sup>  
Muhammad Aiman Arifin<sup>2</sup>  
Razlina Razali<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia  
(2022214502@student.uitm.edu.my)

\*Corresponding Author

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia  
(aimanarifin@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>3</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia  
(razlinarazali@uitm.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** *The rapid growth of interest in understanding early career (EC) employee requirements has led to the evolution of research perspectives in the field of human resource management (HRM). HRM scholars in the field of career management are constantly exploring how HRM can develop EC employees via effective practices. However, a comprehensive review of EC employees using bibliometric analysis has not been published. Given this gap, this bibliometric analysis utilized VOS Viewer, Bibliometric R-package, and Map Chart software to evaluate EC employee-related publications, using data extracted from Scopus. 675 documents were studied on EC employee scholarship. This study aimed to analyse (1) volume; (2) increasing trend; (3) worldwide distribution; (4) key journals; (5) pioneer authors; and (6) dominating nations in EC. To achieve this, a specific combination of the words was merged together with logical operators, "TITLE-ABS-KEY ("early career")", thus making the outcomes more centralized. Scholars in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 showed growing interest in this field, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of publications. Among a total of 675 documents, 322 were published during this period. The analysis showed that the EC is still an emerging concept and this review shall serve as a guide for future research directions by providing a comprehensive overview of the recent development.*

**Keywords:** *Early Career, Human Resource Management, Bibliometric Analysis, Scopus Database*

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## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century world of work has become increasingly challenging due to the fast-changing and volatile working environment. Due to the competitive job market and constraints in job viability, employees, especially those at the EC level need to speedily adapt, sustain and develop their performance (Hollywood et al., 2020; Gadja, 2019). Thus, career management of EC employees becomes one of the crucial strategies towards career success (Giraud et al., 2019) and the achievement of an organization's mission and vision (Osibanjo et al., 2014; Salau et al., 2018).

The field of EC was brought to attention by several scholars such as Gonella et al. (1996), Nicholas, (2022a, 2022b, 2018) and Rodríguez-Bravo and Nicholas (2019) but the term gained more magnetism in recent years because the idea has shifted from general to specific based on the requirements of each profession (Nijs et al., 2014). EC practices encompass those HRM strategies that boost the potential of existing employees from the individual (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Soares & Mosquera, 2021; Yogalakshmi & Suganthi, 2020; Zhou, 2022) and organization performance (Ahmed & Ke, 2016; Osibanjo et al., 2014; Sarianti & Octerindah, 2021).

HRM ensures that the human resource function is aligned with the primary objectives of organizations. It emphasizes human resource activities that contribute to the achievement of the organization's mission and goals, fostering a strong connection between HRM (Ahmed & Ke, 2016). Career management within organizations is closely intertwined with the internal strategies of the firm (Yogalakshmi & Suganthi, 2020). Consequently, career management can also exhibit unique characteristics and serve as a distinguishing factor, which becomes apparent through the recruitment process, as well as career development and promotion initiatives (Sarianti & Octerindah, 2021).

Career management is considered one of the important branches of an organization, thus the improvement of EC employees should be developed under HRM functions to make an employee's career success a reality (Hernaus et al., 2019; Lee & Lee, 2018). For that reason, the HR department should play a major part in the execution of effective and efficient policies involving EC employees (Khan, 2018).

In line with the increasing interest in the field of early career, this bibliometric review puts light on the development of the literature related to EC with the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the total number of documents, increasing trend and worldwide distribution in the field of EC?
- RQ2: Which are the journals on EC that have the most contributors?
- RQ3: Who are the pioneer authors in the field of EC that have the most citations?
- RQ4: What are the related topic words in EC?

## Literature Review

### Working Definitions and EC Overview

EC employees can be classified as those with their ages ranging from 25 to 40 years old or those aged 20 to 34 years old (Lee et al., 2017). Several scholars in the field have conducted studies on EC employees from different professions such as EC researchers (Nicholas et al., 2022), mental health social workers (Segey, 2023), academic leadership (Mitić, 2023) project managers (Borg & Scott-Young, 2021), surgeons (Sinyard et al., 2022), young and single women professional (Merluzzi & Phillips, 2022) and accountants (Jackson et al., 2022).

While attempting to expand the overview towards EC definition, the concept of EC is divided into two schools of thought. The first thought considers EC management as an important contemporary HRM practice that assists an organization's sustainability (Osibanjo et al., 2014). This is because having skilled employees, including those at the EC level will contribute to the productivity of the company (Sarianti & Octerindah, 2021).

The second school of thought views that individual employees can also develop themselves without waiting for career development support from their organizations (Creed & Hood, 2009). Human behavior can be motivated and regulated by goals hence, newcomers need to follow predetermined organizational rules for their career goal-setting to be effective (Royle, 2015). A career goal can help to organize thoughts, inspire motivation, guide behavior, and form the basis of a career strategy (Greenhaus et al., 1995). Moreover, effective career goals can optimize an individual's career effectiveness and favourable personal work-related outcomes that come from their actions and experiences (Creed & Hood, 2009; Judge et al., 1999).

### Why Early Career?

From the two schools of thought that have been explained above, it is clear that the core idea of EC management is geared towards individual and organizational success. The existing literature suggests there are multifaced reasons for linking human resource management with EC management for employees.

#### Individual:

- *Goal development.* Human behavior can be motivated and regulated by goals hence, newcomers need to follow predetermined rules for goal setting to be effective (Royle, 2015). A career goal can help to organize thoughts, inspire motivation, guide behavior, and form the basis of a career strategy (Jackson & Wilton, 2017).
- *Effective career planning.* To set clear and realistic goals, self-discovery is important, including learning about one's personality, dimensions, values, interests, and preferred lifestyle (Greenhaus et al., 2018). New entrants who choose careers based on their values, skills, and interests are more likely to perform better in their first jobs and achieve more success in their early careers (Wittner & Kauffeld, 2021)
- *Career development.* New employees are guided and developed in accordance with the needs of their employers and will increase their motivation and ability (Creed & Hood, 2009; Jena & Nayak, 2023; Sharma et al., 2021).
- *Career success.* To optimize a person's career effectiveness and favorable personal work-related outcomes that come from their actions and experiences (Talluri & Uppal, 2022; Yu et al., 2022).
- *Career self-management.* To indicate independence from organizational career management practices and personally motivated procedures that entail developing

information, plans, and strategies to grow and manage one's career (Sturges et al., 2002; Talluri & Uppal, 2022).

### Organization:

- *Organizational survival and growth.* The ability of excellent and productive employers and employees to work together to achieve organizational goals and objectives is crucial for any organization's sustainability (Osibanjo et al., 2014).
- *Sustain more high-skilled talents.* Organizations will enjoy and make useful high-skilled talents to expand their business (Baporikar, 2017)
- *Increase the level of competencies.* Having employees who have skills with a top performance level in the workplace will contribute to the productivity of the company (Sarianti & Octerindah, 2021).
- *Protecting intellectual capital.* By preserving a competitive edge and raising the likelihood of survival in the economic world of today (Khandekar & Sharma, 2005).

Several bibliometric studies on EC have been conducted by scholars. For instance, Yusop et al., (2020) analyzed the research trends of EC faculties from the last two decades using the Web of Science and Scopus databases. Similarly, Kuzminska et al., (2022) conducted a bibliometric study using Scopus and Web of Science Databases to determine the research directions of EC researchers. Meanwhile, using information retrieved from the Scopus database, Zhang and Yu (2020) determined the best publishing approach for EC scientists. Therefore, to add to the body of knowledge, our bibliometric study aims to provide a bird's eye view of the published works related to EC using data from the Scopus database from 1996 to 2023. The reason for starting the search in 1996 is because this year recorded the first published works on EC in the Scopus database.

### Methodology

In this study, scholarly works concerning EC were examined using the bibliometric analysis method. Bibliometric analysis is one of the methods that is used to measure the impact of previous works in a particular field (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015). It is a quantitative method that can be used to assess study trends based on published scholarly works. In addition, the bibliometric analysis method enables scholars to understand the past trends in a particular topic and highlights any advancements in the field (Durieux & Gevenois, 2010). This is because, the bibliometric analysis method allows the discovery of patterns of published scholarly works such as type of publication, year, author, affiliation, and performance matrices (Zakaria et al., 2021). As such, this method is useful for scholars to predict potential areas of study in a particular field or discipline (Wallin, 2005).

#### Choosing the Database

The first stage in the bibliometric analysis was to select an appropriate database. According to Íñiguez-Rueda et al. (2008), the data sources used should be appropriate and reliable for the analysis. For this study, data were retrieved from the Scopus database on 13 January 2023. The reason for using the Scopus database is because this database has the largest single abstract and indexing database (Burnham, 2006) compared to other databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science.

### **Scope of Search**

The scope of this bibliometric analysis included only published works in the field of early career. We exclusively focused on EC and excluded fields that did not specifically address this area of study.

### **Search Criteria**

The search for articles related to EC was conducted using specific keyword combinations. In the advanced search option, two similar combinations of the keywords were merged with logical operators: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (early career) AND PUBYEAR > 1996 AND PUBYEAR < 2023 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar"))) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, "j")). Upon entering these strings of combinations, the system showed a total of documents. We thoroughly studied the contents of all documents, excluding those from unrelated countries, and the final figure came up to 675 documents.

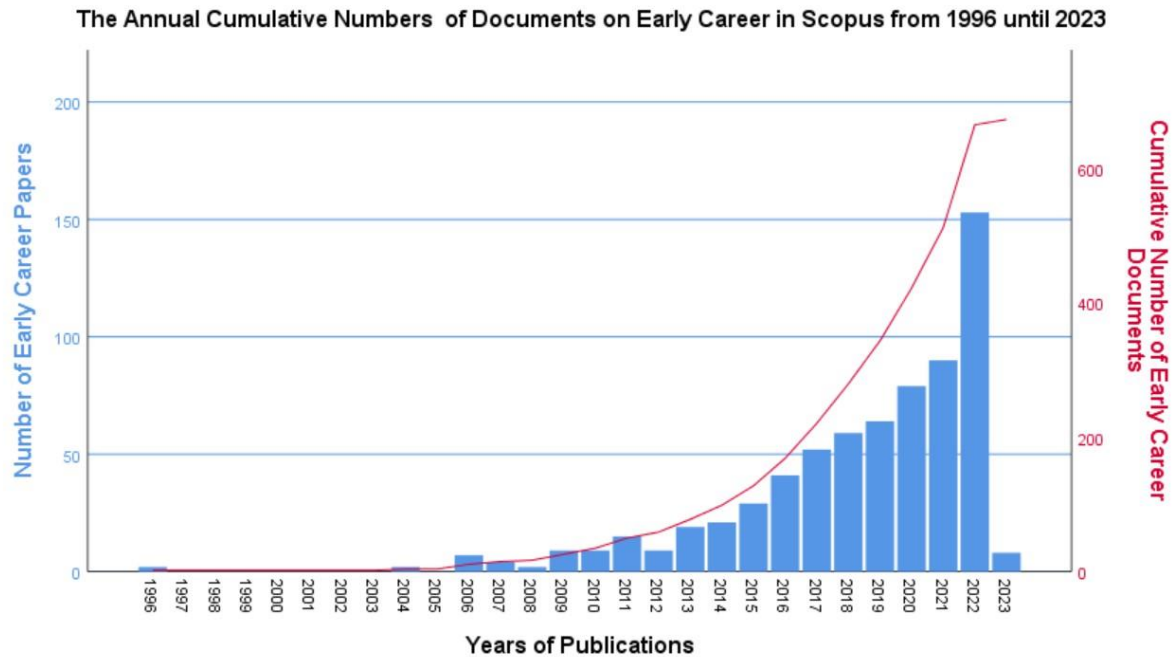
### **Measurement**

The retrieved data were analyzed using the VOS Viewer, Bibliometric R-package, and Map Chart software. This enabled the researchers to assess the relationship between the most cited authors, co-authorships, countries and affiliations, keywords used and related areas of studies. The researchers also used the software to visualize the retrieved data through illustrations of geographical link maps which are useful to depict co-authorships and co-occurrences of the published works. In addition, Microsoft Excel and map charts were also used to answer the research questions.

### **Results**

This section presents the outcomes of the analysis in relation to our four research questions. Total Number of Documents, Increasing Trend and Worldwide Distribution in the Field of EC in Terms of Top Countries.

From 1996 to 2023, the total number of documents in the Scopus database that were related to EC was 675. These were 531 articles, 45 review papers, 28 conference papers, 21 editorials, 20 book chapters, 16 notes, 12 letters and 2 short surveys. Figure 1 shows the trajectory graph of the EC scholarship.

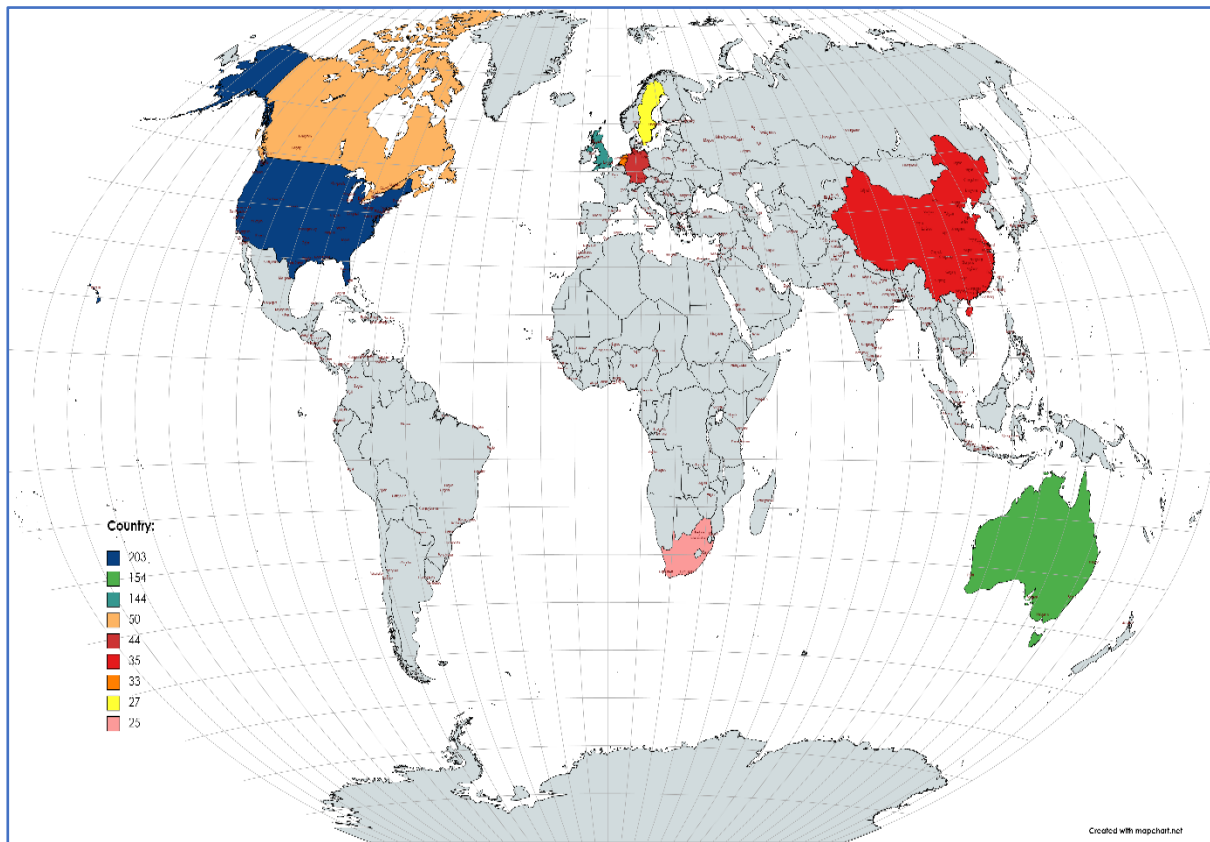


**Figure 1: The Annual and Cumulative Numbers of Documents on EC in the Scopus Database from 1996 until 2023**

Source: Scopus Database

Figure 1 depicts the cumulative number of documents related to the field of EC in the Scopus database from 1996 to 2023. It can be observed that the number of publications on this field became increasingly popular among scholars in years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Out of the 675 documents, 322 were published during these years. Seemingly, the increasing trend in the past few years shows that scholarly works related to EC are still developing and starting to gain traction due to the increase in literature.

The map in Figure 2 reveals that knowledge generation in the field of EC is dominated by the United States with a total of 203 documents, followed by Australia (154), the United Kingdom (144), Canada (50), Germany (44), China (35), Spain (34), Netherlands (33), Sweden (27) and South Africa (25).



**Figure 2: Worldwide Distribution in Top Countries**

Source: Scopus Database

### Analysis of Influential Journals Having Highest Output

The second objective of this study was to determine the influential journals and documents produced by the respective journals. Table 1 shows the ranking of the journals in relation to their output. The distribution of the documents in these journals gave further information relating to the academic impact in the field of early career. Based on Table 1, it can be seen that Social Sciences-related journals dominate the top three highest publications in the field of early career. The journal that produces the highest number of scholarly works related to EC was the Higher Education Research and Development Journal (15 documents) followed by Studies in Higher Education (12 documents) and Teachers and Teaching Theory and Practice (11 documents). Other than that, published documents relating to EC were also available in Sciences-related journals such as American Psychologist, Future Science Oa, Frontiers in Marine Science, and Journal of The American College of Cardiology. This result reveals the multifaceted nature of the EC scholarship.

**Table 1: Top 10 Journals Publishing EC Scholarship Ranked By Scopus**

Rank	Source Title	No. of Documents	Domain
1	Higher Education Research and Development	15	Social Sciences (Education)
2	Studies In Higher Education	12	Social Sciences (Education)
3	Teachers And Teaching Theory and Practice	11	Social Sciences (Education) Arts and Humanities
4	International Journal for Academic Development	10	Social Sciences (Education)
5	American Psychologist	9	Psychology
6	Future Science Oa	8	Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology Biotechnology
7	Frontiers In Marine Science	6	Environmental Science Agricultural and Biological Sciences Aquatic Science
8	Higher Education	6	Social Sciences (Education)
9	Journal of The American College of Cardiology	6	Medicine
10	Learned Publishing	6	Social Sciences

Source: Scopus Database

### **Pioneer Authors in EC Scholarship**

A further advantage of bibliometric study is that researchers can obtain the prominent authors in a particular field or field of interest (Nerur et al., 2008). Our bibliometric analysis using the Scopus database revealed that the most prominent authors between 1996 and 2023 were Nicholas, D. and Rodríguez-Bravo, B. with 12 documents. This was followed by Watkinson, A. and Xu, J with 11 documents, Boukacem-Zeghmouri, C. and Herman, E. with 10 documents, Abrizah, A. and Jamali, H.R. with 8 documents, Świgoń, M. with 7 documents and Polezhaeva, T. with 5 documents. Among the documents published by the top three productive authors are EC Researchers in The Pandemic-Fashioned ‘New Scholarly Normality’: Voices From the Research Frontline (Nicholas et al., 2022), Reputation and Scientific Communication: EC Researchers in Spain (Rodriguez & Nicholas, 2019) and EC Researchers' Quest for Reputation in the Digital Age (Nicholas et al., 2018).



**Table 2: Top 10 Pioneer Authors on EC Scholarship Ranked by Scopus**

Author(s)	Documents produced	Affiliation (Country)	Scopus Citations
Nicholas, D.	12	United States	123
Rodríguez-Bravo, B.	12	Spain	110
Watkinson, A.	11	United Kingdom	110
Xu, J.	11	China	110
Boukacem-Zeghmouri, C.	10	France	97
Herman, E.	10	United Kingdom	97
Abrizah, A.	8	Malaysia	76
Jamali, H.R.	8	Australia	76
Świgoń, M.	7	Poland	64
Polezhaeva, T.	5	Canada	64

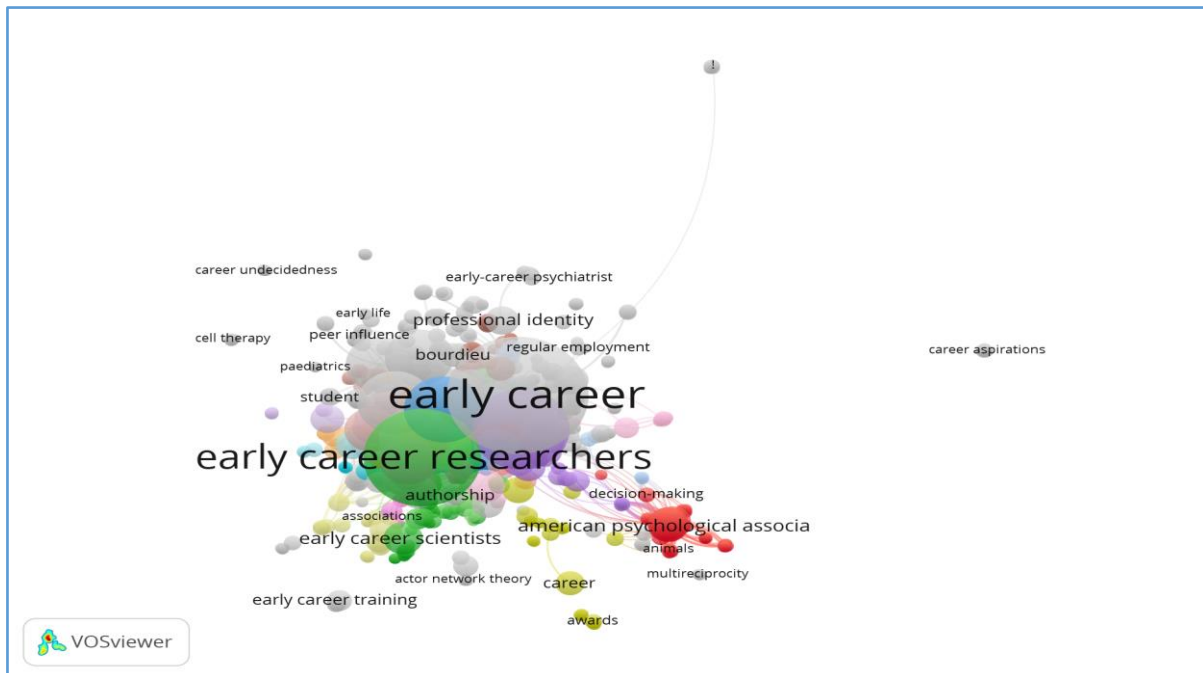
Source: Scopus Database

Our analysis found that the earliest published works on EC available from the Scopus database were that of Cancio et al. (1996), titled, *Reconsidering The Declining Significance of Race: Racial Differences in Early Career Wages* and Gonella et al. (1996), which was titled, *The Impact of Early Career Specialization on Licensing Requirements and Related Educational Implications*. Meanwhile, the articles that received the most citations from 1996 to 2023 are *From Apprentice to Colleague: The Metamorphosis of Early Career Researchers* (Laudel & Gläser, 2007) with 207 citations, *Reconsidering the Declining Significance of Race: Racial Differences in Early Career Wages* (Cancio et al., 1996) with 155 citations and *Promoting EC Teacher Resilience: A Framework for Understanding and Acting* (Johnson et al., 2014) with 110 total of citations.

### **Topic Words in EC and Emerging Themes in Early Career**

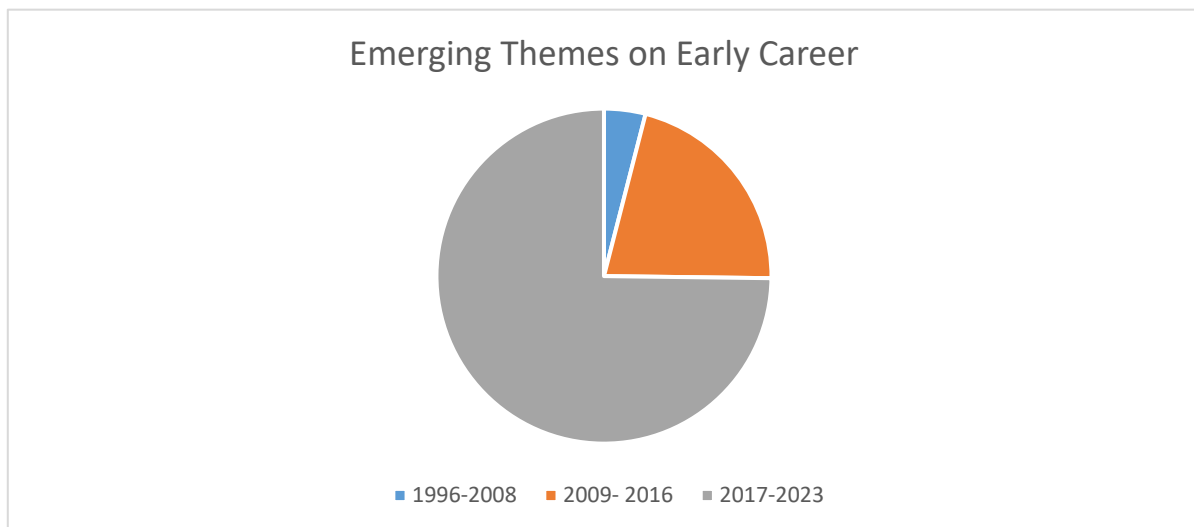
Figure 3 illustrates the most recurring topics related to EC scholarship as generated by the network visualization mode in the VOS viewer. It can be observed from the large nodes that the main topics are early career, EC researchers, EC teachers and career development. Meanwhile, the other topics that are starting to gain attention from scholars in the field include professional development, mentoring, resilience and retention.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the researchers divided the documents into three phases which are 1996 to 2008 (initial years), 2009 to 2016 (middle years), and 2017 to 2023 (pioneer years). Our analysis reveals that the initial years of EC represent 4 percent of the total documents, while the middle years represent 21.2 percent. Finally, the pioneer years represent 74.8 percent of the total documents on early career.



**Figure 3: Most Frequent Variables**

Source: Scopus Database



**Figure 4: Emerging Themes on Early Career**

Source: Scopus Database

### Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the trend of research on ECs has been increasing exponentially, beginning worldwide in the 1990s while mostly championed by Western institutions.

Our bibliometric study has provided a comprehensive overview of EC scholarship from 1996 to 2023 using information retrieved from the Scopus database. This study has illuminated research trends and popular topics related to early career. It has also provided information about past and present scenarios that can help interested scholars ground their studies and develop conceptual and theoretical models.

Our study also revealed that 2020, 2021 and 2022 were the pioneering years of EC scholarship. In addition, from our study, it can be anticipated that topics that are gaining popularity in this field include professional development, mentoring, resilience and retention.

Moreover, the majority of scholarly works related to EC published in Scopus are from Western countries. However, scholars from Asian countries such as China and Malaysia have started to contribute to the body of knowledge. In terms of discipline, social sciences dominate most of the highest publications, in particular the education sector. Due to this, educational journals such as Higher Education Research and Development have been producing the highest outputs. Also, the trend from our analysis shows a shortage of published works from other sectors. Although the field of EC is starting to receive attention from scholars, only 37 percent of the published works in Scopus were from other sectors. Our study also revealed an interesting finding whereby it was found that although EC literature is commonly associated with the business and management sector, the education sector is far ahead of other sectors in terms of publication output in this field.

Finally, our study revealed that most of the top authors studied similar contexts of EC employees which is the EC researchers. Thus, more contributions from different professions or perspectives regarding EC are encouraged to provide interesting findings and identify the best HRM practices to represent specific professions.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research**

This bibliometric analysis based on the Scopus database highlights the increasing trend in EC scholarly works worldwide especially in recent years. Indirectly, the output of these published works would benefit the industry and academia, especially given the demanding career world today.

However, our study is not without limitations. First, the published works on EC were based on 675 documents that were retrieved from the Scopus database only. Therefore, we suggest future studies to analyze documents from other famous databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science. Such analysis may yield different results and provide a more comprehensive coverage of the EC field.

Second, our study only focused on topics related to EC which were derived from the title of the article, abstract and keywords. Due to that, all other published words that were related to EC but did not explicitly use the term 'early career' were excluded.

We suggest future studies focus on an in-depth content analysis of articles in different domains to provide better insights into available modes and theories in the respective domains. Future researchers can conduct review studies including systemic literature review and meta-analyses to deepen understanding of early career. Furthermore, a comparative study between published works in the Western and Asian settings can bring a more comprehensive perspective on the EC field.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that no search query is 100 percent accurate. Despite that, this bibliometric study is essential as it contributes to the growing body of knowledge related to the EC field. Our study is one of the earliest to analyze details bibliometric information related to EC from the Scopus database. As the career world has become more competitive, especially in the post-pandemic era, more studies are needed in the field of EC for the industry

and academia to make more efforts to make EC individuals future-proof. Our study can be a stepping stone to guide future researchers on the potential areas of research related to early career.

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