Peer-Reviewed Article

© *Higher Education Politics & Economics*
Volume 11, Issue 1 (2025), pp. 2-22
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
doi: 10.32674/hepe.v11i1.7219
ojed.org/hepe

Random-Track: The End of Academic Career as We Know It?

Aslı Vatansever
Bard College Berlin

ABSTRACT

The decrease in public funding and the subsequent increase in temporary employment in academia are often viewed as crisis symptoms. While the crisis rhetoric may be premature, the turn towards hyper-competitive qualification systems that generate unfixed career advancement models may indeed mark a break from the tenure-oriented career structure. Drawing on a pilot online survey conducted with over 300 academics within the European Research Area (ERA), this study reveals a potentially radical transformation of the academic career paradigm from a tenure-oriented path towards an increasingly episodic, nomadic, and unsystematic drift, defined here as 'random-track'.
Keywords: academic career, academic labor markets, qualification systems, career structure, tenure-track, career sequence paradigm

We have entered a new phase in the history of university as institution, usually associated in the extant literature with increased managerialism, digitalization of teaching, commercialization of higher education, legitimation struggles within humanities, and casualization of academic workforce (Brienza, 2016; Childress, 2019; Ivancheva, 2015; Kalfa et al., 2018). Particularly, the rapid percentile growth of temporarily employed researchers is considered a major policy challenge (American Association of University Professors, 2014; American Federation of Teachers, 2020; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [BMBF], 2021; European Commission [EC], 2017; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021; University and College Union, 2021). These contemporary shifts are often interpreted as indicators of a 'crisis of academia' or the collapse of university (Carta et al., 2020; Donskis et al., 2019). While the growing

volatility of academic careers may not yet mark the end of university as a whole, it may indicate the end of the traditional, tenure-oriented academic career structure as we know it. This study supports this argument with data from a pilot online survey conducted with 321 researchers from different disciplines and at various postdoctoral career stages within the European Research Area (ERA). Looking beyond the immediate implications of temporary employment and identifying the occupational trend it points toward, this study embeds labor casualization into the framework of long-term sectoral development.

Scholarship on academic careers off the tenure-track addresses a variety of issues. Topics in this line of literature include career breaks among temporary staff (Jones, 2023), lack of permanent prospects and job satisfaction (van der Weijden et al., 2015), and precarity both in terms of employment (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015) and as the predominant work culture (Burton & Bowman, 2022).

Despite these analytical advances, extant literature by and large continues to view episodic employment as deviation rather than an incipient career structure (Childress, 2019; Hirslund et al., 2019; Ivancheva, 2020). This can be attributed to three factors: first, tenure's centrality in the cultural imagery of academia as the pinnacle of scientific merit seems to surpass its growing factual marginality in contemporary academic careers (Cerami, 2022). Consequently, what the ubiquity of nonstandard career patterns signifies beyond precarization remains underexamined. Second, academic career research is largely dominated by life-cycle approaches, focusing on individual coping mechanisms and career management strategies developed in response to the accelerated academic labor process (Whitchurch et al., 2021; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). While individual narratives offer insight into the diversity of professional paths, the singularizing focus fails to capture the shift in the overall career-structural framework that those particular stories are embedded in. Last but not least, there is a lack of distinction between instant employment status and overall career trajectory (O'Connor et al., 2023; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). The overemphasis on precarity as a mere career stage or policy challenge fails to look beyond the time-scale of employment transitions and see their pervasiveness for what it is: a sign of a more substantial shift in the overall mode of academic career progression.

To overcome these gaps, this study shifts the focus away from the subjective, contractual, or labor processual levels towards the sectoral level. It explores how the academic industry itself proliferates a new career sequence model in response to the double bind of labor oversupply and underfunding. On the theoretical level, this study expands on Christine Musselin's (2005, 2018) typology of qualification models and Alexandre Afonso's (2014, 2016) classification of academic labor markets in two ways. The study complements them with the category of *transitioning systems* and *transitioning labor markets* respectively. It also integrates them into the overarching framework of 'career structure' and 'career paradigm'.

Musselin (2005) associated transitioning academic labor markets with increased regulation. This study further defines the aspect of transition as a radical change at the level of advancement systems and labor markets. In terms of advancement systems, this study identifies a turn from promotion-based towards competitive and from competitive towards randomized advancement. With regard to the nature of labor markets, this study argues that there is an ongoing shift from secure towards

insecure and from insecure towards what Frank and Cook (2013) describe as *winner-take-all* markets. *Academic career structure* refers to the commonly recognized career sequence paradigm that prevails in slightly different forms across diverse academic systems. Qualification systems represent local interpretations of the predominant career sequence paradigm; labor markets determine its viability. Therefore, the re-regulation of qualification systems and the (dis)equilibrium of academic labor markets present an accurate starting point for analyzing the overall transformation of the predominant career structure.

Empirically, the current study draws on the results of an ERA-wide pilot survey conducted from the end of February to the end of June 2023. Data include responses from both tenured and non-tenured segments of the postdoctoral workforce from various disciplines and 20 countries. The non-linear and incidental nature of this emergent career structure is described here as *random-track* as a subcategory of the 'career paradigm' framework. This conceptual design aims at contributing to two different lines of literature: By capturing the ongoing career paradigm shift in academia, it intends to shed light on the current direction of the profession and contribute to the contemporary discourse on academic work. By embedding the notion of career into the larger framework of sector-specific mode of progression, it offers a holistic toolkit for studying the diversification of occupational trajectories. At a further level, the concept of *random-track* can also illuminate the impact of discontinuous employment on sectors with formerly unilinear progression schemes.

The study consists of five main sections. The first two sections introduce the analytical framework and elucidate the methods of data gathering and analysis. Section 3 presents the survey findings and evaluates them on the basis of the random-track framework. Sections 4 and 5 revisit the main postulates of this study and discuss both the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, *academic career structure* refers to the commonly recognized career sequence paradigm prevalent across diverse academic systems. Traditionally, this pattern has been characterized by unilinear upward career mobility towards permanent professorship (or equivalent) as the highest career level. Accepting career as both a cognitive and social construct *à la* Goffman (1961), in all academic systems on which data are available, "the ideology of tenure" (Cerami, 2022, p. 53) has so far shaped both the subjective self-image of the academic and the objective career prospects that are deemed desirable and theoretically achievable for anyone who fulfills certain measurable qualification criteria.

Academic career system, on the other hand, describes the contextual variations in the *modus operandi* of the abovementioned career sequence paradigm. The term refers to "features such as entry requirements, the ranking system, rules and criteria for appointment and promotion, the type and work content of different positions" (Frølich et al., 2018, p. 17). An academic career system is ultimately shaped by the institutional and legal frameworks of academic qualification that are designed to select the most eligible candidates for permanent employment (i.e., the beneficiaries of the predominant career sequence paradigm).

The workability of the overall career sequence paradigm depends on the efficiency of a given academic qualification system to provide a sufficient number of adequate career prospects for those it recruits. Occupational prospects in line with the predominant career sequence paradigm are defined in this study as *paradigmatic advancement chances*. Their availability is determined by the labor market dynamics of the sector. Many academic systems have responded to the double bind of labor oversupply and public underfunding with increasingly exclusionary adaptations of the traditional tenure-oriented career paradigm over the last decades. Especially within the ERA, academic qualification systems have been re-designed to select an ever-shrinking group of beneficiaries ("insiders"), while expanding the reserve army of equally qualified but statistically disposable substitutes ("outsiders"; Afonso, 2014). This has been achieved through higher education reforms that prolong and complexify the non-tenured period at the postdoctoral stage and, thus, systematically decrease the availability of paradigmatic advancement chances.

This simultaneous shift in the academic labor markets and advancement schemes is explained here with the category of 'transitioning' markets and systems. Following Afonso's (2016) classification, academic labor markets are categorized according to a given market's exclusivity/inclusivity towards candidates with foreign degrees or backgrounds (closed/open) and its capacity to provide permanent prospects for entrants (secure/insecure). Accordingly, 'transitioning labor markets' are defined in this study in two forms: first, it involves academic labor markets hitherto known as secure that are now transitioning towards more insecurity (i.e., towards a higher discrepancy between the labor supply and the provision of permanent jobs). Second, it also refers to insecure labor markets that are currently transitioning towards what Frank and Cook (2013) dubbed the *winner-take-all markets*. In the academic sector, a winner-take-all market basically boils down to a near total elimination of permanent positions and an extensive randomization of academic recruitment. This is, for example, currently the case in the German academic labor market, where 92% of the academic workforce is employed on fixed-term contracts, while only 5% of Ph.D.-holders have a prospect of tenure (BMBF, 2021; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2020).

On the other hand, the category of *transitioning advancement systems*, is developed in view of Musselin's (2005) typology, consisting of "promotion-based systems" that grant tenure based on seniority and "competitive systems" featuring multiple trials with no guarantee of permanent employment (p. 136). Accordingly, *transitioning academic systems* refer to both promotional systems on the way of becoming competitive, and competitive systems evolving towards deregulated academic environments with no standard advancement scheme. In the former case, that is, the promotion system turning competitive, evaluation mechanisms gradually cease to serve the purpose of academic qualification. Instead, the aim is to reduce the number of publicly funded *insiders* by complexifying the career progression procedure. Legislative frameworks like the Bologna Process and corresponding policies in national contexts, such as the Gelmini Reform in Italy (Fadda et al., 2022) or the *Fundamental Law of Universities Act* that introduced more competitive quality assurance mechanisms in Spain (Sanz-Menéndez & Cruz-Castro, 2019), serve this specific purpose.

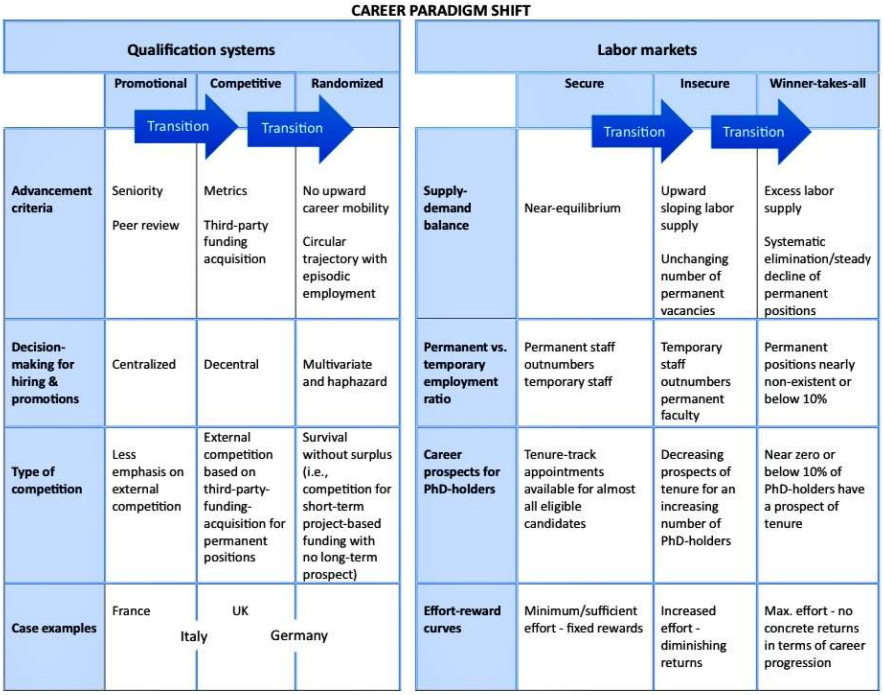
In the latter case, when competitive academic systems turn into disorganized landscapes of hit-or-miss careers, the qualification scheme starts to pursue a massive elimination of all who cannot subsidize their own positions through successive external funding. While a competitive system aims to coerce the greatest possible portion of the labor force to self-fund, disarranged advancement systems aim to ultimately punish those who fail to do so. This is, for example, what the highly contested Fixed-Term Academic Employment Law in Germany, that recently reduced the temporary employment phase at the postdoc level from 6 down to 4 years without providing concrete permanent options, intends to achieve (BMBF, 2024).

Transitioning from competitive towards anarchic academic systems involves an extensive randomization of the defining parameters and stages of academic career. This study defines the new career structure that emerges from this paradigm shift as *random-track*. The term implies a discontinuous, nomadic, and circumstantial career path, which, rather than progressing, seems to move around aperiodic cycles of employment and unemployment. Without apparent career advancement or goal attainment translated in promotion and rank increase, *random-track* stands in stark contrast with traditional tenure-track that was characterized by a "limited number of academic 'rites of passage'" (Vinkenburg et al., 2020, p. 2).

A variety of intersectional factors, including socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, or political stance might play a role in how randomization proceeds in individual trajectories. Yet, the fact that the predominant career structure is becoming random in its overall course persists. The general tendency of randomization is identified in this study along a set of objective and subjective criteria. Objective criteria include mobility, employment status security, and career stability. Subjective criteria involve experiences and personal perceptions about whether one's professional status and activities provide autonomy, thematic/disciplinary coherence, career prospects, and professional satisfaction.

Random-track trajectories typically feature increased – and often involuntary – institutional and geographic mobility. The latter sometimes implies mobility between different academic qualification systems with partly clashing advancement criteria, posing additional disadvantages in terms of career progression (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2024). As to employment status and career stability, the candidate's track-record is marked by high liminality, resulting from a series of short- or fixed-term postdoc positions with no scheduled tenure and frequent and/or relatively long involuntary breaks between employment phases. Even if the individual obtains a permanent position at one point, it is usually not a direct or planned result of any of the multiple past positions. Random-track careers chronically circle around disconnected postdoc positions ideally designed for early-career qualification, with little to no thematic coherence and only limited autonomy over work content. On a subjective level, the unpredictability of the overall trajectory often obscures career goals and causes a distance between career expectations and achievements. Figure 1 summarizes the analytical framework deployed in this study to explain the shift in the academic career paradigm.

Figure 1: Shift in the Academic Career Paradigm



Note: Author's own elaboration, informed by categorizations of Musselin (2005), Afonso (2016), and Frank and Cook (2013).

METHODOLOGY

Sample Selection and Data Collection

This study is based on a pilot online survey exploring the general characteristics of contemporary academic career trajectories. The pilot survey aimed at providing an initial understanding of the assumed sectoral transformation and probe the salience of the random-track framework. A formal application for ethical clearance was submitted to Riga Stradins University on 22 February 2023, but the requirement for approval was waived by the respective ethics committee. Between 27 February and 30 June 2023, the online questionnaire was disseminated through personal networks and cold emails to a total of 1360 individual PhD-holders working in research and higher education within the ERA. Potential participants were recruited by searching through institutional personnel databases. In line with the study's aim to identify the general shift in career trajectories across disciplines, systems and career stages, the sample selection followed a non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy that allowed for higher sample diversity. In addition to university and research institute personnel databases, the survey was sent out to two broad researchers' networks in

Germany, namely the Network for Decent Work in Academia (*NGAWiss*) and the network of Brazilian researchers working in Germany (*Rede Apoena*). Purposive sampling criteria were limited to having obtained a doctorate and chosen academia as main occupation. The research design and sample selection aimed at discerning the common tendency underneath the variations – not the singular factors that lead to variations of the common tendency. Accordingly, intersectional factors such as age, ethnicity, and gender that might lead to different varieties of randomization were not deemed decisive at this stage.

The sample comprised Ph.D.-holders at different career stages. Early-careers with up to 7 years of post-Ph.D. experience represent the majority (47,81%), followed by mid-careers with 7-15 years of post-Ph.D. work experience (38,44%) and senior academics with over 15 years of experience in research and teaching (12,5%). Based on the disciplinary classifications of OECD's Frascati Manual (OECD, 2015), 236 respondents came from social sciences and humanities, while 84 were from natural sciences, engineering and technology, medical and health sciences, and agricultural and veterinary sciences. With 321 valid responses out of 379, the completion rate was 85%. Compared to the number of researchers currently active within the European Education Area (1,17M), the sample size had a confidence level between 90-95% (EC, n.d.).

Responses were collected from Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK, with the majority coming from Germany (93), the UK (46), and Italy (39). Nine respondents' country of work differed from their country of residence. In some cases, the commute was exceptionally taxing, as the researcher resided in Belgium but worked in Ukraine, was employed in Slovenia but lived in Germany, or was working in the Czech Republic while residing in Portugal.

The rationale behind the geographic focus was threefold. First, ERA itself represents an effort to create a coherent framework of qualification across varying academic systems. Second, researcher mobility, which is an integral element of randomized career tracks, has become an *imperative* within the Bologna process (Courtois & O'Keefe 2024). Lastly, despite ongoing integration efforts, member countries differ in their academic labor market structures and employment regimes (Bojica et al., 2023). Within this contradictory context, mobility often involves a constant move between different academic career advancement regimes and labor markets with partly clashing advancement criteria, adding to the randomization and bifurcation of career paths. Hence, ERA provides an emblematic case for labor market and academic system transitions.

Participants received an informative participant consent form. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, moving from general questions about (1) current employment status and (2) work history, to more personal ones about (3) career goals and occupational satisfaction. Prompts were developed around six code clusters corresponding to the main determinants of random-track (mobility, employment in/security, career in/stability, seniority-autonomy discrepancy, thematic in/coherence, career dis/satisfaction). Questions pertained to the respondents' academic field, career stage, current position, current funding/employment type,

number of temporary positions after the Ph.D., number of different academic institutions the respondent worked at so far, duration of shortest term position, frequency of non-academic jobs, total duration of unemployment, motives to persevere in academia, level of perceived autonomy in teaching and research, thematic overlap between current position and actual research interests, estimated likeliness of obtaining tenure, the centrality of obtaining tenure as career goal, and the perceived degree of correspondence between career plans and current professional status.

Apart from the initial part confirming participant consent and documenting scientific discipline and country of work/residence, the questionnaire comprised 15 structured questions with partly non-exhaustive response sets and specification options to allow for uninformed, neutral or more detailed replies, when necessary (Singh, 2007). The differing levels of complexity in each part of the survey, the information-rich character of the case, and the preliminary nature of the study necessitated a qualitative non-scaled survey design. This allowed a larger number of respondents to provide detailed considerations on their occupational trajectories.

Data Analysis

As randomization of careers denotes a gradual process rather than an absolute condition, the analysis followed a non-parametric evidential interpretation of ordinal data. The research design was based on the idea of a fully qualitative survey "which not only collect[s] qualitative data, but prioritize[s] qualitative research *values* alongside qualitative techniques" and "seek[s] to harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuanced, in-depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues" (Braun et al., 2020, p. 2 – italics in the original). Accordingly, the survey results were analyzed in three steps. First, they were analyzed thematically along the six initial code clusters explicated above. At the second stage, the resulting data were cross-tabulated with (a) one independent variable (*career stage*), (b) one composite variable (*career stability* as a composition of mobility, current employment status, current funding type, and employment history), and (c) one dependent variable (*perceptions of career prospects and goal-attainment*). These steps provided a specified focus on the main themes. But reducing the data into a summary of singular questions analyzed along specific themes can run the risk of yielding a particularized and de-contextualized understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Therefore, at the last stage, the survey results were analyzed as "one *cohesive* dataset" (Braun et al., 2020, p. 10, emphasis in original). This involved analyzing respondents' replies to certain questions in relation to their replies to other questions and against the backdrop of their entire trajectory as conveyed in the survey. Participant quotes used in this study have not been edited except for typos and punctuation.

FINDINGS

In the last instance, random-track career is characterized by an *unpathed trajectory* (marked by serial episodic employment, precarious mobility, and prolonged liminality) that results in an overall *goal disorientation* and is sustained by a *phantom*

idea of career as a sequence of intentional steps eventually leading to professional fulfilment and worthy of emotional/financial sacrifices. The first one pertains to objective career conditions; the last two refer to the subjective mechanisms that result from, or serve to cope with, those conditions. The cross-tabulated and combined findings will be summarized along these two dimensions in the following.

Career Without a Path: Episodic Employment and Nomadic Affiliation

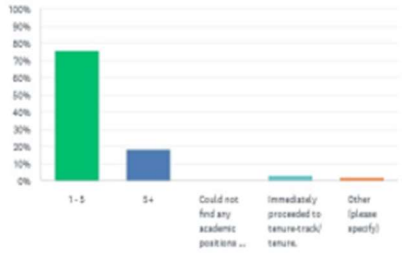
The respondents' current employment status shows that approximately 86% of early-career, 60% of mid-career and 45% of senior academics have temporary positions. However, what defines the randomness of a career is not whether one has a permanent position *per se*, but rather the unsystematic nature of the entire road that leads – or, in most cases, fails to lead – to that permanent position. An analysis of the data against the backdrop of the composite variable of *career stability* demonstrates that the career structure trend thematized in this study goes beyond supposedly temporary early- or mid-career job insecurity. As a matter of fact, even tenured or senior respondents' track records have been marked by unpredictability and volatility for most of their professional lives. Of those who currently have a permanent academic job, 67% had up to five different temporary positions, while ca. 20% had more than five different temporary positions before they landed their current one. Almost 62% of currently tenured respondents went through two to five different institutions until they ended up in their current institution. Also, over 52% of them experienced unemployment phases varying between less than six months and longer than a year during their postdoc phase.

Frequent positional and institutional mobility, accompanied by employment instability, appears to also be the norm at later career stages. For example, 65% of senior respondents have worked at two to five different institutions. So far, 45% have had up to five different temporary positions, while 40% have held more than five different temporary positions. More importantly, those jobs appear to be of extremely short duration, as only 7.5% of senior academics had contracts for longer than three years throughout their careers. For senior academics, 52,5% also experienced unemployment phases of varying durations.

With regard to positional mobility, over 75% of all respondents worked at least in up to five different fixed-term or temporary positions. Over 56% of those with a track record of one to five different fixed-term positions also experienced unemployment for longer than a year in total during their postdoc phase. Of the 58 respondents who worked at more than five different fixed-term positions throughout their careers, approximately 55% stated that their shortest postdoc employment was as brief as three to six months, while 36% also experienced unemployment for longer than a year in total. Figure 2 depicts positional mobility among respondents.

Figure 2: Positional Mobility Among Researchers Across ERA

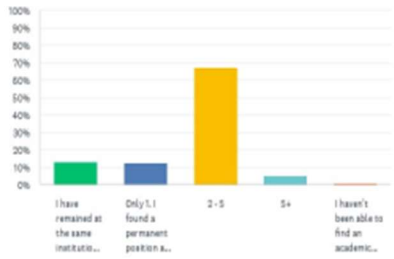
Q10. How many different fixed-term or temporary academic positions did you have after the completion of PhD? (This includes project-, course-, or task-based academic work at a university or research institute. If your postdoctoral work experience only consists of administrative jobs at academic institutions, please choose "Other" and specify.



As to institutional mobility, only around 13% of the respondents remained at the same institution they received their Ph.D. from, while only 12% managed to find a permanent position right after Ph.D. Almost 68% of the respondents worked at two to five different institutions throughout their postdoctoral careers. Broken down into different staff categories, the share of that segment is particularly high among full-time non-tenured instructors (100%), currently unemployed researchers (approximately 89%), adjunct lecturers (75%), and those in administrative positions (50%). Figure 3 shows the general levels of institutional mobility.

Figure 3: Institutional Mobility Among Researchers Across ERA

Q11. In how many different academic institutions have you worked since the completion of your PhD?



Another distinct feature of random-track career is the extreme transience of employment phases. The shortest term academic positions the respondents had until now vary between 12-36 months (approximately 29%), 3-6 months (26%), or 6-12 months (24%). Those whose shortest employment phase was longer than three years (approximately 8%) as well as those who never had to take up temporary employment after the Ph.D. (approximately 3.5%) constitute a remarkably negligible minority.

Last but not least, a random-track career is often marked by discontinuity und involuntary career disruptions. Around 60% of all respondents experienced

unemployment of some duration throughout their careers. Over 62% of early-career, over 50% of mid-career, and 52.5% of senior academics went through unemployment phases of various lengths. Even among professorial staff, almost 49% underwent unemployment periods varying between less than six months and longer than a year before obtaining tenure. Finally, approximately 45% of currently unemployed respondents were unemployed for longer than one year in total.

Career Without Aim: Goal Confusion, Purposeless Perseverance, Phantom Careers

At a subjective level, random-track careers are accompanied by (1) ambiguity of career goals, (2) perceived distance between actual professional status and career objectives, and (3) devotion to an idea of career that doesn't exist in practice. 118 out of 321 respondents (approximately 37%) stated to see tenure as a career goal and work toward it. However, paradoxically, of those 37%, almost 25% also assessed their chance of actually obtaining tenure as "rather unlikely or impossible". Meanwhile, 18% gave up on tenure due to institutional/structural/labor market-related factors, even though it was initially a major career objective. 9% never strove for tenure but somehow obtained it, while only about 17% said that tenure was a career goal which they eventually achieved. This seems like a strikingly low rate for goal attainment in a sector traditionally characterized by unilinear progression and effort-reward reciprocity.

Among early-career researchers, goal confusion seems to find expression in pessimism and rejection of conventional career. An early-career social scientist from Germany, Respondent 272, who currently has a fixed-term research fellowship, has already worked at two to five different institutions and temporary positions, and spent longer than a year after the Ph.D. unemployed, describes the chances of obtaining tenure as "rather unlikely/impossible". Yet, when asked about how assessing career, Respondent 272 expressed self-contentment, while signaling deliberate reluctance:

> I'm at a point which is ok for my academic career, but am not sure anymore if I *want* to continue pursuing it due to the lack of positions and the surrounding legal regulations in Germany. (Respondent 272 – italics added)

Another early-career social scientist from the UK with a temporary teaching fellowship, Respondent 214, who had the rare privilege to remain at the same institution where the Ph.D. was received and has only experienced unemployment for less than six months so far, thinks tenure is possible within the next five years, but the response reflects an overall cynicism towards the idea of traditional straightforward career:

> I never believed in a specific career plan, growing up in an environment of financial crisis requiring me to be agile and flexible. Taking advantage of short-term opportunities seems to work thus far. Let's see if tenure is real. (Respondent 214)

Respondent 249, an early-career humanities scholar from Germany with a fixed-term adjunct/substitute lecturer contract, who has already worked at two to five different institutions and spent longer than one year in unemployment, assesses the chance of landing a permanent position as "unlikely/impossible". When asked about

career goals, Respondent 249 conveyed general dissatisfaction with the current academic climate, which apparently renders a traditional career path unattractive:

> [T]he current academic environment is not supportive of [science], because a) a lot of time is spent with writing applications for grants, b) often projects [on certain topics] are being supported financially […]. So a position yes, but not under these institutional and dogmatic circumstances. (Respondent 249)

While early-careers articulate their goal confusion as active disdain and skepticism toward traditional academic careers, resignation seems to prevail at later stages. For example, Respondent 287, a mid-career social scientist from Germany, has worked at several different temporary positions and two to five different institutions so far. Currently, Respondent 287 has a fixed-term part-time administrative position and a temporary teaching-only contract. Yet, somewhat inconsistently for someone with distinctly non-research positions, the respondent refers to "passion for research" as the main motivation for staying in the business. Similarly, while defining tenure as a career goal achievable "within the next 5 years or less", there is concern in the face of the austerity of Germany's academic landscape:

> I am doing what I can and I am hopeful that I will get there, but fearful that it might not happen in this country despite my high qualifications and great work, because there are not enough permanent positions, and teaching has turned into a commodity. (Respondent 287)

Disorientation and disappointment also echo in the words of a mid-career social scientist from Portugal. Respondent 132 worked in up to five different temporary positions at two to five different institutions, before landing a current fixed-term research fellowship thanks to "a combination of privilege, insane amounts of work, and luck" explains:

> Where only 5-10% of candidates are able to get (precarious) research positions, somehow I managed to do that. […] While I do have a job […] –, the weight that is associated with seemingly *eternal precarity*, knowing that I have to *compete again and again and again for my next contract*, the constant counting down of months of contract, the fact that *I am not considered a full member of my university* […] is outrageously disturbing. (Respondent 132 – italics added)

Defeatism, goal ambiguity, and purposeless perseverance is also evident in the case of Respondent 246, a mid-career medical and health science scholar from the UK, who currently works as a research fellow with a fixed-term contract. On whether obtaining tenure represents a career goal, Respondent 246 wrote:

> Yes, but as it is *very unlikely*. I am *not necessarily working towards it* and have *considered moving out of academia* due to lack of stability and low pay. However, I have *not given up yet*. (Respondent 246 – italics added)

Mixed feelings and career disorientation are not limited to non-tenured faculty. In fact, almost 29% of the tenured respondents state that obtaining tenure was either never or a long-abandoned career goal for them. Respondent 104, a tenured professor in medical and health sciences in Netherlands, is among 7.5% of senior academics who proceeded to have tenure right after finishing the Ph.D. Ironically, this respondent neither set obtaining tenure as a priority, nor ever strove towards a

straightforward career, but "got a permanent position *due to a mistake of the Human Resources Department*" (Respondent 104 – italics added).

Respondent 193, a tenured mid-career humanities professor from Poland, also describes a coincidental path to tenure by pursing "both academic and non-academic paths", regularly taking up non-academic jobs, spent over a year in total unemployed, and then uncalculatedly applied for and got a tenured position. Yet, imprecise career objectives and disillusionment seem to persist:

> I'm still open for non-academic career options. […] I deeply depleted my internal psychical resources and became disillusioned with academia. Currently, I don't perceive it […] as an „important job that makes a difference". It is a highly toxic, underpaid and stressful work environment. (Respondent 193)

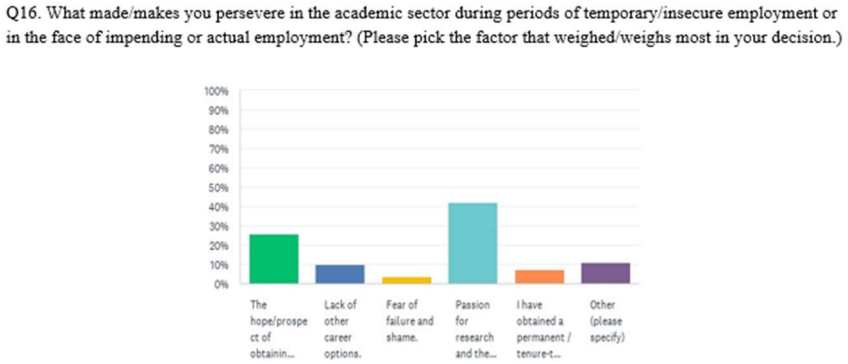
Another case of goal confusion at an advanced career stage is Respondent 175, a currently unemployed senior humanities scholar from Latvia who had a tenured professorship in the past. But after having reached the goal of having tenure, realized they were "better without it". Despite having deliberately resigned a tenured position, Respondent 175 somewhat inconsistently claims to be looking for teaching jobs at the moment and deems the chances of getting a tenured position "likely within the next 5 years or less".

Rampant career disorientation and objectively bleak prospects notwithstanding, the majority sticks with a career path they are evidently dissatisfied with, exhausted from, or unsure about. Strikingly, there were only four career dropouts among 321 respondents and, paradoxically, one of them was in fact still trying to find a way back into the sector. Yet, those who persevere do not seem to be rewarded with paradigmatic career chances, either. Over 65% have either a fixed-term (externally or internally funded project-based employment for a specified duration) or temporary position (flexible and assignment-based employment such as course-based hourly contracts, task- or service-based special contracts, or substitute contracts). Moreover, most of those 65% seem to experience all three subjective aspects of random-track mentioned above: Almost half of currently fixed-term, temporarily employed, or unemployed researchers (approximately 45%) assess their chances of obtaining a permanent academic position as "rather unlikely/impossible", while approximately 46% claim to be working toward it, nonetheless. As to how the non-tenured respondents (fixed-term, temporary, and unemployed participants combined) perceive the distance between their career objectives and their current professional status, almost 1/4 perceive their careers as "significantly lagging behind their expectations" and they "do not expect to catch up anymore".

Considering the rigidity of academic labor markets and the general unclarity of career goals common across different career stages, one might wonder why so many, including the currently unemployed, stay in the game. The majority of respondents (42%) referred to "passion for research and the sense of belonging to the academic community" as their main motive. Only approximately 26% remain(ed) in academia for the possibility of obtaining a permanent position one day. Three respondents commented that they persevere for the sake of "finding another temporary position soon".

Figure 4 illustrates respondents' main motives to persevere through unstable and episodic professional lives.

Figure 4: Motives for Perseverance



While these percentages give a general idea about the main narrative ("passion for research"), a closer look demonstrates the contradictions of resilience in today's randomized *careerscapes*. Respondent 79, a tenured mid-career social scientist from Netherlands, remained in academia simply because "no other options worked". Another case is Respondent 315, a senior humanities lecturer from Germany with a fixed-term contract, who had more than five different temporary jobs at more than five different institutions throughout their career. Despite having spent longer than a year in unemployment in total, the respondent never took up any jobs outside of academia and preferred to remain formally unemployed until finding another academic job. What appears like devotion to the academic profession, however, turns out to be a love-hate attachment, as Respondent 315 refers to "contempt for the system" as the main reason to stay in academia and adds a cautionary remark in parentheses for future candidates: "(avoid entering it)".

Another participant, Respondent 132, whose lengthy reflections on the futility of academic career were cited previously, refers to "sense of public service" as a source of resilience. Considering the fact that the quoted respondent is a fixed-term researcher with no civil servant status, this seems like internalized commitment to an idea of academic career that doesn't exist in reality. The implications of this ideological relic of the tenure-track paradigm can only be understood in view of the accompanying emotional and financial sacrifices. Despite career instability and bleak prospects, approximately 48% of the respondents reported that they continued to self-fund their academic activities during times of unemployment. Investing into a career that does not even provide the bare minimum (i.e., formal employment) is certainly in accordance with what Gill (2009) called *the sacrificial ethos* of academia. This work culture may have been appropriate for the tenure-track paradigm, in which unpaid community services were balanced off with lifetime of job security and social benefits. However, despite lacking its status and privileges, most random-track academics continue to adhere to the work ethic and public responsibility of a civil servant, carrying the burden but none of the benefits of their profession and, thus, massively reduce the total labor cost in the sector. The entire academic industry seems

to cling to, and in fact economically hinge upon, an image of academic career that does not correspond to the sector's current realities.

DISCUSSION

The sample presents outcomes in two key areas. At the empirical level, the findings corroborate the shift in the mode of career progression in both its objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively, the increased career instability of the respondents (identified by the composition of current employment status and work history) confirms the growing unpredictability and inconsistency of academic careers. Subjectively, the respondents' replies on their objectives, motives, and self-assessments document how randomization is accompanied by goal confusion, decrease in perceived goal attainment, and a largely dissatisfactory occupational attachment bordering on purposeless perseverance. Moreover, the range and qualitative character of the data also bring to light the differences in the way professional dissatisfaction is experienced and articulated at different career stages: early-career researchers tend to highlight agency and personal choice, whereas mid-career researchers stress the diminishing levels of psycho-emotional capacity and structural possibility. Senior academics, on the other hand, retrospectively question academic career's overall worth.

The findings also demonstrate the contradictory nature of randomization. The majority of individual actors navigating their careers in this changing environment do not peacefully comply with the new parameters of their profession imposed upon them, nor do they immediately stop aspiring towards traditional career objectives. The considerable portion of those who deem tenure unlikely/impossible and yet continue to aspire toward it attests to this rift. The analysis also depicts the various ways in which the enduring attachment to the idea of a factually vanishing career type manifests itself: the common reference to *passion for research* even in the absence of a research position is one of them. Another example is the lasting sense of public service or the widespread practice of self-funding academic activities despite the absence of a tenured position and civil servant status. The findings thus reveal the cultural tenacity of the tenure-track ideology, even though its socio-economic foundations, along with the career type it relied on, are evidently vanishing.

At the theoretical level, the sample highlights the analytical utility of the *academic career paradigm* approach in two ways. First, the framework of *academic career structure*, as opposed to the unifocal study of employment duration or individual career narratives, permits a more comprehensive analysis of the structural shift that goes beyond academic precarity or labor market deregulation. Viewed from this analytical lens, the plethora of non-standard academic trajectories co-existing within a formally unified research area, which Musselin (2005) had interpreted as a sign of increased institutional autonomy by the beginning of the Bologna process, rather appears to be a result of arbitrary recruitment practices and the consequent randomization of qualification schemes across ERA. Second, the *random-track* category proves particularly useful for grasping the idiosyncrasies of contemporary careers. Applied to the sample, the random-track model highlights the paradigmatic

overlap in seemingly disparate individual trajectories across different qualification systems and career stages.

CONCLUSION

This study addressed three deficiencies in the extant literature that have so far limited our understanding of the academic sector's current transformation and long-term direction: the tenure-centered discourse's continued marginalization of episodic employment as deviation from the norm, the predominance of life-cycle approaches that tend to overlook the common structural tendency within individual stories, and the precarity literature's overemphasis on instant employment status that sometimes misrepresents temporary employment as a transitory situation limited to early career. To overcome these shortcomings, it adopted a two-pronged approach. On a theoretical level, the study proposed an alternative analytical framework, informed by Musselin's (2005, 2018) typology of qualification systems and Afonso's (2014, 2016) varieties of academic labor markets. These two classificatory models were combined within the framework of *academic career paradigm* and complemented with the categories of *transitional academic systems* and *transitional labor markets*. To identify the shared characteristics of contemporary academic careers, the study proposed *random-track* as a subcategory of the *career paradigm*. This analytical lens was then applied on data from a pilot survey conducted with over 300 researchers working in ERA. The framework and the supporting findings have implications for both the analysis of academic work in the 21st century and the theorization of episodic employment in career sectors formerly characterized by stability and unilinear progression.

The study's concrete contribution to research on academic labor and employment is twofold. First, on an empirical level, the findings delineate the three interwoven characteristics of randomized careers: (1) a *haphazard occupational history* (marked by serial episodic employment, precarious mobility, and involuntary disruptions) leading to (2) *goal disorientation* and sustained by (3) a *phantom idea of career*. The findings demonstrate the pervasiveness of these traits in contemporary careerscapes. The long-term implications of this trend exceed the problem of precarity and indicate a gradual transformation of the entire career structure of the profession. However, the ideological hegemony of the vanishing paradigm continues to shape individuals' imaginations of success, while making it practically impossible for an ever-growing majority to achieve success in previously defined terms. This interregnum between a dying old world and a new one yet to be born (Gramsci, 1999) instigates frictions of both personal and political kind. The former is evident in the respondents' comments cited in previous chapters. The latter can be seen in various contemporary academic labor movements across the globe that exceed the scope of this study (Berry & Worthen, 2021; Hirslund et al., 2019; Vatansever, 2023).

Second, on a theoretical level, based on these findings, the study confirms the analytical utility of the *career paradigm* framework for a better understanding of the long-term sectoral transformation beyond its immediate symptoms like precarity and contingency. Although the type of irregular career outlined in this study has evidently become common to a growing majority of the academic labor force in the Global

North (EC, 2017), it has not yet been named, let alone systematically analyzed in extant literature. In view of the decline of tenure as a career model, the current discourse focuses mostly on individual coping mechanisms (Whitchurch et al., 2021) or policy suggestions for alternative employment models (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021). The following question often remains unaddressed: given the current employment trends and putting our normative expectations of 'what ought to be' aside, what kind of career structure is factually replacing tenure-track? The concept of random-track represents an opening effort to tackle this question head-on.

This study has limitations both in terms of sample and scope. The method of non-probability sampling provides little control over the location and career stage of respondents. For example, the predominance of random-track respondents can be attributed to the high proportion of samples from systems that are transitioning from competitive to randomized (Germany) or from promotional to competitive (Italy), and competitive (UK). Similarly, non-tenured academics can be more inclined to participate than tenured faculty, which might have led to a relative participation bias. However, since random-track is more about the unsystematic nature of the entire career trajectory, regardless of whether it results in the obtainment of tenure at some point or not, than instant employment status, the impact of the said bias on the conclusions remains insignificant. As to the limitations in terms of the scope of the study, to depict the structural shift in its full scope, the geographic focus should be expanded. Similarly, to shift the focus and map out the particular within the general, additional aspects, such as differences between career profiles in different labor markets or intersectional factors that affect individual trajectories should be accounted for. This study identifies the general sectoral trend and provides a snapshot of an ongoing structural tendency, which can serve as a starting point for future studies in the field. The insights and the conceptual framework presented here will hopefully inspire a broader perspective on career not only as an individual's journey determined by personal choice, but as a profession-specific mode of progression, shaped and reshaped by the structural conditions of the sector and sustained by a legitimizing work culture.

REFERENCES

American Association of University Professors. (2014). *Contingent appointments and the academic profession. Report prepared by a joint subcommittee of the Association's Committee on Contingent Faculty and the Profession and Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. https://www.aaup.org/report/contingent-appointments-and-academic-profession

Afonso, A. (2016). Varieties of academic labor markets in Europe. *Political Science & Politics, 49*(4), 816-821.

Afonso, A. (2014). How academia resembles a drug gang. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2407748

American Federation of Teachers. (2020). *An army of temps: AFT 2020 adjunct faculty quality of work/life report*. https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/adjuncts_qualityworklife2020.pdf

Berry, J., & Worthen, H. (2021). *Power despite precarity. strategies for the contingent faculty movement in higher education*. Pluto.

Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2024) *Die reform des wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetzes*. https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/faq/wisszeitvg-reform.html

Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung. (2021). *Bundesbericht wissenschaftlicher nachwuchs (BuWiN) 2021.* Statistische Daten und Forschungsbefunde zu Promovierenden und Promovierten in Deutschland. https://www.buwin.de/dateien/buwin-2021.pdf

Bojica, A. M., Olmos-Peňuela J., &Alegre, J. (2023) A cross-country configurational approach to international academic mobility: exploring mobility effects on academics' career progression in EU countries. *Higher Education*, *86*, 1081–1105.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2020). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 24*(6), 641-654. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550

Brienza, C. (2016). Degrees of (self-)exploitation: Learning to labor in the neoliberal university. *Journal of Historical Sociology, 29*(1): 92-111. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12119.

Burton, S., & Bowman, B. (2022). The academic precariat: Understanding life and labor in the neoliberal academy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43*(4), 497-512. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2076387

Carta, M. G., Moro, M. F., Kirilov, I., Romano, F., & Tagliagambe, S. (2020). The current crisis of academia-led research: A threat to the common good? Preliminary data from Europe and the United States. *BMC Research Notes*,*13*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13104-020-05128-9.

Cerami, L. (2022). "What is tenure?" In A. Vatansever & A. Kölemen (Eds.), *Academic freedom and precarity in the Global North: Free as a bird* (pp. 40-58). Routledge.

Childress, H. (2019). *The adjunct underclass. How America's colleges betrayed their faculty, their students, and their mission*. UCP

Courtois, A., & O'Keefe, T. (2024) 'Go away and make a big thing of yourself somewhere else': Precarious mobilities and the uses of international capital in Irish academia. *Higher Education, 88*, 1871-1887. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01190-5.

Courtois, A., & O'Keefe, T. (2015) Precarity in the ivory cage: Neoliberalism and casualization of work in the Irish higher education sector. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 13*(1), 1–24.

Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund. (2020). *DGB-Hochschulreport: Arbeit und beschäftigung an hochschulen und forschungseinrichtungen. Expansion und Wettbewerb im Spiegel der amtlichen Statistik*. https://www.dgb.de.

Donskis, L., Sabelis, I., Kamsteeg, F., & Wels, H. (2019). *Academia in crisis. The rise and risk of neoliberal education in Europe*. Brill.

European Commission. (n.d.). European education area. Higher education initiatives. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/about-higher-education.

European Commission. (2017). *Eurydice brief: Modernization of higher education in Europe: Academic staff 2017*. https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/modernisation-higher-education-europe-academic-staff-2017

Fadda, N., Marino, L., Pischedda, G., & Ezza, A. (2022) The effect of performance-oriented funding in higher education: Evidence from the staff recruitment budget in Italian higher education. *Higher Education*, *83*, 1003-1019. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00725-4

Frank, R. H., & Cook, P. J. (2013). Winner-take-all markets. *Studies in Microeconomics, 1*(2), 131-154.

Frølich, N., Wendt, K. Reymert, V., Tellmann, S. M., Elken, M., Kyvik, S., Vabø, A., & Larsen, E. (2018). *Academic career structures in Europe. Perspectives from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria and the UK*. NIFU Report, *2018*(4). Oslo.

Gill, R. (2009). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neoliberal academia. In R. Ryan-Flood & R. Gill (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (pp. 228-244). Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor.

Gramsci, A. (1999). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. (Q. Hoare, & G. N. Smith, Trans.). https://ia600506.us.archive.org/19/items/AntonioGramsciSelectionsFromThePrisonNotebooks/Antonio-Gramsci-Selections-from-the-Prison-Notebooks.pdf. (Original work published 1971).

Hirslund, D. V., Davies, S. R., & Monka, M. (2019) *Report on national meeting for temporarily employed researchers: Copenhagen September 2018*. Temporarily Employed Researchers Forum. https://dm.dk/media/12351/report_national_meeting.pdf.

Ivancheva, M. (2020, March 20). The casualization, digitalization, and outsourcing of academic labor: A wake-up call for trade unions. *Focaal Blog*. https://www.focaalblog.com/2020/03/20/mariya-ivancheva-the-casualization-digitalization-and-outsourcing-of-academic-labour-a-wake-up-call-for-trade-unions/

Jones, K. (2023) Precarity of post doctorate career breaks: Does gender matter? *Studies in Higher Education, 48*(10), 1576-1594.

Kalfa, S., Wilkinson, A., & Gollan, P. J. (2018). The academic game: Compliance and resistance in universities. *Work, Employment and Society, 32*(2), 274-291.

Musselin, C. (2018). New forms of competition in higher education. *Socio-Economic Review, 16*(3), 657–683. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy-033

Musselin, C. (2005). European academic labor markets in transition. *Higher Education, 49*, 135-154. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-2918-2

O'Connor, P., Le Feuvre, N., & Sümer, S. (2023). Cross-national variations in postdoc precarity: An inquiry into the role of career structures and research funding models. *Policy Futures in Education, 22*(4), 1-19. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/14782103231177483

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2015). *Frascati manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*, *The Measurement of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Activities*. OECD. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en.

Ortlieb, R., & Weiss, S. (2018) What makes academic careers less insecure? The role of individual-level antecedents. *Higher Education, 76*, 571–587. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0226-x

Sanz-Menéndez, L., & Cruz-Castro, L. (2019). University academics' preferences for hiring and promotion systems. *European Journal of Higher Education, 9*(2), 153-171. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1515029

Singh, K. (2007). *Quantitative social research methods*. Sage.

The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2021, August). *Rethinking tenure: Abolish, strengthen, or replace it?* https://store.chronicle.com/products/rethinking-tenure.

University and College Union. (2021). *Precarious work in higher education. Insecure contracts and how they have changed over time: A report by University and College Union*. October 2021 update. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10899/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-May-20/pdf/ucu_he-precarity-report_may20.pdf.

van der Weijden, I., Teelken, C., de Boer, M., & Drost, M. (2015) Career satisfaction of postdoctoral researchers in relation to their expectations for the future. *Higher Education, 72*, 25-40. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9936-0

Vatansever, A. (2023). The making of the academic precariat: Labor activism and collective identity-formation among precarious researchers in Germany. *Work, Employment and Society, 37*(5), 1206-1225.

Vinkenburg, C.J., Connoly, S., Fuchs, S., Herschberg, C., & Schels, B. (2020). Mapping career patterns in research: A sequence analysis of career histories of ERC applicants. *PLoS ONE, 15*(7), e0236252. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236252.

Ylijoki, O.H., & Henriksson, L. (2017). Tribal, proletarian and entrepreneurial career studies: Junior academics as a case in point. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(7), 1292-1308.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the collaboration and support of Ieva Puzo during the preparation and dissemination of the survey, as well as the generous comments of Agata Lisiak, Aysuda Kölemen, and Ana Ferreira on the preliminary versions of the questionnaire.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received joint financial support from the Philipp-Schwartz-Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Threatened Scholars Integration Initiative of the Open Society University Network for the research and authorship of this article.

ASLI VATANSEVER, Ph.D., is a sociologist of work and social stratification with a focus on precarious work and labor activism in academia. Her work on academic labor activism has appeared in prominent outlets in the field of labor studies such as Work, Employment and Society. Her third monograph with the title At the Margins of Academia: Exile, Precariousness, and Subjectivity was published in 2020 (Brill). Recently, she co-edited a volume Academic Freedom and Precarity in the Global North: Free as a Bird (with Aysuda Kölemen, Routledge, 2022). Email: a.vatansever@berlin.bard.edu.