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**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic  
Space and Time**

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## The Hard Path of Academic Stabilisation into a Neoliberal European Academic Framework

Marialuisa Villani, Sanja Djerasimovic and Orazio Giancola

Napoli 'Federico II', marialuisa.villani@federica.eu

University of Exeter, s.djerasimovic@exeter.ac.uk

Università di Roma 'Sapienza', orazio.giancola@uniroma1.it

**ABSTRACT:** *In the past two decades, the early career academics have faced increasingly difficulties to stabilise their position in the European academic systems. Currently we can identify similarities in the academic recruitment as results of neoliberal policies (Deem, Brehony, 2005; Ball, 2012; Bozzon et al., 2018) adopted by the European governments that contribute to the academics precarity. The process of entering and stabilizing the academic career has always been long and complex. Spending reduction policies have also exacerbated the difficulties and competition among aspiring academics. In UE countries, the 'new academic regime' (Normand, 2016) produces a new stage of academic capitalism. This situation has produced various effects. The push to 'publish or perish' has strongly raised average productivity, placing aspiring academics under tremendous pressure. Furthermore, it is possible to identify several effects at the individual level: the fragmentation of the career path has reflected on life paths, on forced mobility, on parenting choices, on psycho-physical well-being. Starting from a set of semi-structured interviews carried out in the fields of education sciences, sociology, physics, biology and medicine, this paper shows the effects of the changes listed above, also taking into account the differences between the various research sectors. The interviewees live and work in Italy, several European countries and the United Kingdom. We investigate the figure of 'new european researcher' who build is academic and private identity (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019; Colarusso, Giancola, 2020) following the ideas of mobility, new mode of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994), performativity, accountability. The early career researcher (ECR) has to face several trials such as: the balance of private and professional life, instability, penury of fundings and jobs vacancy, the managerialization of academic profession (Normand, Villani, 2019). In addition, ECR needs to combine individual strategies for academic survival in a context that impose the oxymoron of competitive partnership. Finally, we analyse the path of the real researcher that struggles constantly with all difficulties imposed by the new academic regime.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Academic research, European higher education space, Academic careers, Work-life balance in academia, New academic identity.*

### Introduction

The past thirty years have seen a profound transformation of academic work conditions in the European Higher Education Space. It is possible to

identify three elements that characterise this change: first of all the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) (Clark, 1998; Enders *et al.*, 2013) that produced the institutionalisation of the University Managerialism (Clark, 1998).

Secondly the NPM introduced the new mode of Governance (Maassen, Neave, 2007) that influenced all the European countries producing, on one hand a mechanism of isomorphism, and on the other hand each country generated national specificities. The European academic systems have been organised differently in the countries from North to South. The universities define their organisation in a 'new academic accountability regime' based on the delegations of the decision-making process.

Thirdly it is possible to identify top-down policy initiatives aimed at standardising the processes and outcomes of higher education (HE) (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019; Colarusso, Giancola, 2020a).

At the beginning of the twenty first century, the isomorphism mechanisms in the several European countries contributed to spreading and implementing national and transnational policies that created and formalised the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It is possible to identify two elements that contributed to the creation of EHEA: The Bologna Process and the Lisbon strategy (Djerasimovic, Villani 2019).

Furthermore we identify in the 'new academic regime': a new mode of knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994) based on the production-mediation-use triangle (Weiler, 2009, 2011).

In the contemporary European Higher Education systems the knowledge production is a key issue because it has an impact on all the aspects of the academic profession. Nowadays academic professionals cope with the pressure of the university managerialism which profoundly changed their work practices. The new features of knowledge production influence the academic path of the professionals (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019), furthermore they determine the sources of research funding. The knowledge production process in the HE system is a political mechanism which defines not only the quality of the contents, but also determines the rules of the system. It is possible to identify a shift in the HE scenario which implied changings in the «legitimacy of its mission, organization, functioning, moral, foundation, ways of thought and resources are thrown into doubt and challenged» (Olsen, 2007, 28). According to Maassen and Stensaker (2010) the European HE space changed following the new policy logics. They described a European HE system in which the research standardisation, the promotion of innovation and of networks created the European Paradox – «the claim that EU member states play a leading global role in terms of top-level scientific output, but lag behind in the ability of converting this strength into wealth-generating innovations» (Maassen, Stensaker, 2011). Knowledge production, evaluation, and accountability produced a triangle that created a new system of trial for academic professionals (Normand, 2016). Nowadays European HE systems are implementing a knowledge-based policy education paradigm (Normand, 2016). This new mode of governance is

transforming the role of knowledge and producing new rules, tools and practices in the academic world. The academic profession changes in relation to the transformation of university mission.

In the EHEA we assist a new mode of recruitment that is directly related with the NPM and New Mode of governance. The criteria used to evaluate and to recruit early career researchers (ECRs) have been operationalised into measurable standards (Bozzon *et al.*, 2018). These criteria directly influence the individual paths and careers of ECRs (Deem, Brehony, 2005, Ball, 2012; Bozzon *et al.*, 2018). The use of standards to evaluate and recruit intensifies the publish or perish regime that creates competition between peers (Colarusso, Giancola, 2020a).

Furthermore, the reduction of funds and job positions produces a stable precarisation of ECR (Toscano, Giancola, 2017).

Julia Evetts (2011) argues that the academic managerialism produced an 'organisational professionalism' as a replacement to the historical 'occupational professionalism'. The latter founded its bases on trust between equals, on the contrary the organisational professionalism is based on quality assurance and accountability. The organisational professionalism uses standards, evaluation and procedures as tools to improve efficiency and to guarantee the achievement of the University outcomes (Normand, Villani, 2019).

It is possible to identify a growth of external control on knowledge production over academics by national and supranational agencies which creates a tension between innovation and education (Massen, Stensaker, 2011). The separation between teaching tasks and research activities within universities produces a tension between education and research (Massen, Stensaker, 2011).

Meanwhile, the concentration of funding for research cannot stimulate or develop sustainable networks in innovation, and it generates a tension between research and innovation (Massen, Stensaker, 2011). We are witnessing a new configuration of academic work, in which the teaching and researching practices change to fit with the rules of 'new spirit of academic capitalism' (Normand, 2016).

## **1. The Research Method and Field**

In this work, we present the results of a research on early career and precarious researchers in five different fields: Physics, Biology, Medical Sciences, Sociology and Education. We conducted semi-structured interviews with European and extra European researchers, mainly in the Italian Higher Education system.

The use of a non-standard approach allowed us to deeply investigate the biography of the ECR. Through our data we had the possibility to highlight each individual narrative, but at the same time we found similarities produced by the HE policy framework. To reach our interviewees we used the internet (for the biology, physics, medicine

sciences) and we resorted to our research network (for the sociology and education field).

**TAB. 1.** *List of Interviewees*

Field	Number of interviews	Position	Country
Physics	14	Post Doc, Fixed term researchers without tenure 'Rtd A', Fixed term researchers with 'Rtd B'	Italy
Biology	16	Post Doc, Fixed term researchers without tenure 'Rtd A', Fixed term researchers with 'Rtd B'	Italy
Medical Sciences	11	Post Doc, Fixed term researchers without tenure 'Rtd A', Fixed term researchers with 'Rtd B'	Italy
Sociology	27	Post Doc, Fixed term researchers without tenure 'Rtd A', Fixed term researchers with 'Rtd B'	Italy
Education	13	PhD, Post Doc, Lecturer, independent researcher with an hybrid background ' sociology of education', 'education'	Italy, Finland, Cyprus, Romania, Portugal, Hungary, England, Denmark, Russia, Belgium

We used 'purposive sampling' and a snowball sampling method (Chaim, 2008) to access a particular social group and one where participants with an extremely busy schedule would be likely to respond and give time to our research. We conducted face to face interviews and online interviews, they were carried out in English, Italian, Portuguese.

## 2. Physics Field

In the case of researchers belonging to the various disciplinary sectors of physics, a clear profile emerges in which precariousness seems almost institutionalised. The interviewees are characterised by a high level of international mobility (mainly for doctoral and postdoctoral periods). After the mobility period(s) at the international level, there was also a strong national mobility between various universities. This mobility is also characterised by a strong contractual fragmentation that, paradoxically, is reconciled with a strong continuity in disciplinary and research interests. In this regard, it is important to underline how a strong disciplinary identity emerges, beyond academic placement (in terms of contract and academic structure of afference). This identity can also be found in the scientific production that appears to be largely international, with a high level of co-authorship (both with peers and with senior researchers or professors), in line with international trends.

The academic biographies collected in this field show a strong early academic socialisation to evaluative criteria (evaluation as 'second nature'; see Colarusso, Giancola, 2020a) that are discussed on the merits (e.g., regarding the issue of citation thresholds, which in the Italian case

are linked to the processes of obtaining the qualification in order to access academic structuring) but not in the mechanism that is accepted as a career component.

This disciplinary field, as well as that of biology, appears to be one in which instability and mobility are experienced as the norm. Respondents have incorporated the rules of the game typical of the field and seem to know how to use them (even if the impacts on private life are strong). An example of this is the willingness for international mobility even for researchers who already have a 'tenure track' position. In this process of sense-making there is, on the one hand, a strong awareness that the field in which one moves, lives and works entails strong constraints, but it is safe to assume that the interviewees operate an *ex post* justification in a process of signification of individual paths that helps them reconcile expectations and aspirations with systemic constraints.

### **3. Biology Field**

In the field of biological sciences, we can observe from interviews strong elements of correspondence with the field of physics, even if with some specificities. The interviewees of this disciplinary field show a medium-high level of international mobility (mainly for doctoral and postdoctoral periods). However, it is very common to return to the academic institution of departure after the mobility period. Mobility is therefore often linked to training or research on specific issues. Also in this area the scientific production is largely international, with high level of co-authorship (both with peer and with seniors researchers or professors). A specific feature of the sector is, however, the strong connection to the senior researchers in graduate or doctoral institutions or to the advisor/tutor professor. This seems to justify the paths of mobility and subsequent return narrated by the interviewees. There is therefore a strong institutional identity to which, however, is also linked a strong disciplinary identity, especially linked to sub-sector specificities (e.g. biochemistry, genetics, bioengineering, etc.).

Another characteristic element is the strong openness to the non-university world both for fundraising and for future employment positions in the labour market.

In terms of the relationship with existing evaluation policies, the criticisms are mainly related to the problem of the interdisciplinary nature of the field, which is difficult to reconcile with the system of scientific disciplinary sectors. The borderline nature of many of the subjects of study of the interviewees makes it difficult for them to fit exactly into a specific scientific disciplinary sector (as required by the Italian university system). In the words of the interviewees, it is evident how this national specificity is an element of great constriction; this often involves a sort of 'normalisation' and alignment with university rules which is experienced as a factor of great deprivation and constriction.



#### 4. Medical Sciences Field

The academic biographies collected in the medical field show a significant divergence from the two fields previously described. In contrast to what was originally assumed, the level of mobility is medium-low (and it's often a short-term mobility). This finding is linked to the very close relationship that is often established between the researcher and the institution of reference. This leads to a very strong internal selection within the individual university institutions (and hospitals/clinics connected to them). Many interviewees highlight this as a highly critical node in the path to academic placement in the medical field. The effects of this intra-institutional link can be observed in the scientific production, which, although both national and international, shows a high level of co-authorship and very frequently with the professor of reference in the academic institution of belonging, just as frequently with the full professor ('prof. Ordinario') of the disciplinary sector in the institution.

For the interviewees of the medical group, a strong professional identity emerges (even more than disciplinary identity, as in the cases of physicists and biologists). These respondents (except for researchers with tenure) show a strong openness to the non-university world for fundraising or external works *extra moenia* (since physicians can combine clinical and research work with work outside the university).

The strong professional identity, prestige and social recognition associated with the medical profession make the researchers interviewed more secure (or relatively less insecure) about their future. Non-university outlets (even at a relatively older age) act as 'insurance' against the possible impossibility of continuing academic activity (this obviously applies to researchers who do not yet have a stable position), even if this option seems to be experienced with great frustration. In this regard, it should be noted that the typical training path of those interviewed in this sector appears to be particularly long. After graduation (with a formal duration of six years), there follows a specialisation course (accessed through a competitive procedure and lasting, on average, three or four years) and only finally does one arrive at the Ph.D., a step preparatory to formal entry into the academy.

Finally, turning to the relationship with evaluation, there emerges a strong criticism of evaluative criteria in general. This strong criticism is especially directed at selection and career mechanisms that require strong compliance and 'loyalty' to the professor and the institution to which he or she belongs. The link with the institution of origin thus plays an ambivalent role in the academic histories in this field. Entry for outsiders appears to be very difficult, but also for 'insiders' the path is very complex, to the point that several of the interviewees use the metaphor of the 'survivor' or that of 'natural selection' (which obviously has nothing 'natural' about it, since it is the result of sedimented and informally institutionalised practices).

## 5. Sociological field

The sociological field, compared to the previous ones, shows a very strong discontinuity. This field has undergone very strong changes in relation to new evaluation policies (Colarusso, Giancola, 2020a). As it emerged from a large-scale research on the academic precariat in Italy (Giancola, Toscano, 2017), all fields have been strongly shaken from the foundations by the new policies of selection, stabilisation and career progression due to the reform policies, but the field of humanities and social sciences has been particularly vulnerable, both for its consolidated internal arrangements and for a poor recognition of disciplinary specificities in relation to the policies implemented.

Academic biographies in this field show a low level of national mobility and reduced international mobility (even if the youngest interviewees show a positive difference in this sense). This relative 'localism' is accompanied by a largely national scientific production, with some exceptions since the publication strategies are in rapid transformation especially among younger researchers and those in the process of affirmation and/or stabilisation.

For the purposes of publications, many respondents state the importance of having a strong connection to the professor/advisor and/or the full professor in the scientific field. This aspect refers back to the localism previously mentioned, which is one of the aspects most affected and undermined by the new evaluation policies.

Respondents from this area show some level of difficulty in academic self-definition: identity appears to be tied to holding a formal position in the university, but this possibility appears to be a very difficult prospect for many respondents.

Not having strong social and professional recognition, respondents from the sociological area find themselves forced to anchor themselves to their 'role' in academic terms in order to define their professional identity. Therefore, a strong tension emerges between the scientific identity and the social identity that is recognised, and in this tension instability and precariousness play a strongly negative role with respect to public self-affirmation.

Finally, respondents from the sociological area show a very critical attitude towards evaluations (especially towards the 'ASN – National Scientific Abilitation'). At the same time, many state that habilitation is not useful for the purpose of entry and consolidation of an academic position.

## 6. Educational research field

The academic path of educational researchers interviewed was characterised by a pronounced – though not always welcome – mobility

experience: some interviewees spent a few months during their PhD in another country, others moved to another European country for their PhD or Post-doc programme, and in one case outside of Europe in pursuit of permanent lectureship. There were variable levels of choice/necessity with which mobility and the return to the country of origin was approached: for some, outward mobility was pursued out of transnational outlook, for others, it was seeking of opportunities non-existent in the national context, yet for others an explicit career progression requirement not happily entered into. Inward mobility – where it was a choice, and not a programme requirement – was caused either by change in personal circumstance, or the more attractive job opportunities. In large part owing to the transnational networking and collaboration experience and the various conditions of research funding attached to it, the scientific production was mostly international, and had a comparative, and not rarely, explicitly European approach. National production, where it appeared within the national context, was considered inferior to the former, however in one case, there was an explicit concern with the development of field and scholarship on a very local level.

Education being a field rather than a discipline, academic identity was not characterised by a strong attachment to it (our interviewees consisted of psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists) but was rather thought of in terms of dominant activity and a professional project. In this way, academic profession was characterised either by the balance between the researching and teaching aspects vs the academic profession focused on the researching tasks of the academic career, pointing to a split between a more 'traditional', Humboldtian, model and an overtly entrepreneurial academic experience driven by international networking and project-building. In very rare cases, 'hybrid' experiences of academic and non-academic research work were shared, and a desire to pursue a non-academic path emerged, partly influenced by the publish or perish culture of academia (noted by almost all the interviewees), partly by a search for professional – and personal – stability.

In addition to the work culture of academia, other areas noted negatively or at least ambivalently by the interviewees included the academic and international networks which were found to be fundamental for the academic path to opportunity, and occasionally, stability; the tension between national and international recruitment criteria negatively impacting the individual paths; occasionally lack of proper supervision and guidance (particularly where the ECR was working on a large international – European – project); and the discrepancy between traditional, by-thesis doctoral training, and the realities of academic life.

## 7. From work life balance to academic identity: a difficult reconciliation

As Peacock (2016) states, in the last three decades precarity and its derivative expression as 'precarious' – as a way of perceiving oneself – and 'precariousness' – as a generalised state of being) have been advanced as categories to describe a new regime of labour. More recently, there has been a large discussion about the effects of this order on academic institutions (Giancola, 2021). These have been broadly conceived as attacks on disciplinary integrity (Kapferer, 2005); the dramatic expansion of audit and its attendant ranking and evaluative practices (Fontana, Valentini, 20202); and attempts to substitute academic for non-academic values, particularly of economic nature (Ball, 2015). From the relationship with the senior figures such as department directors or faculty deans (configuring relationships such as what Peacock calls hierarchical dependence), to the relationships with colleagues and the institution, up to the meaning to be attributed to one's own work, to the relationship with science and with the production of knowledge, the changes recorded seem to be of considerable entity.

The engagement required by the HE system to achieve a tenure track position produces a gap between professional and personal life, this gap increases if we consider the gender variable. The balance between family and career for women is until now more constrained than for men. For those already with a family, especially women, an international career is very difficult.

The intersection of gender, disciplinary field, and mobility would seem to make the path to parenthood more difficult for women in the fields of physics and biology (but with a decidedly strong relative weight also in the other fields analysed). The parenting project is often perceived as penalising women (as shown also by Ivancheva *et al.*, 2019), who then face the double hurdle of entry bottleneck and stabilisation in academic position.

The parenting desire is present in interviewees' narrative, for both men and women, but for women it is experienced a little bit more as a tension between 'career building process' and 'personal life adjustment'. From the interviews, however, diffuse and differentiated difficulties also emerge in other areas of extra-academic life that are influenced by it: affective stability, housing stability, a widespread feeling of stress (a finding strongly in line with international evidence, see Crew, 2020).

The researchers interviewed almost always spoke spontaneously and extensively about the mix between the difficulties of stabilisation, the pressure to publish or perish, the chasing of the parameters of evaluation in relation to their existential and life status, as well as their prospects (and desires) for the future. What is observed is a vicious circle that is self-reinforcing and that pushes subjects to adapt – even with high costs in terms of limitations in the sphere of private life – to try to assert themselves. All this then has a non-negligible impact on self-definition in both personal and academic terms.

According to above mentioned evidence, the academic identity is a result of: influence by the research field culture, HE policy, personal experience, gender, and the starting socio-economic condition. Academic identity is highly variable: 'fuzzy' in education and sociology; very discipline-bound in physics and biology; shifted to the professional dimension in the medical field.

Our data allowed us to describe three main categories of academic identity built during a linear or nonlinear professional path. Each individual biography can be represented just by one of these identity categories or the combination of its (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019).

The first category is represented by the Individualist-Philomath identity: The narratives of these ECRs are characterised by their very broad, intrinsic, interest in theory and scholarship, and their love of learning, which whilst present in all narratives, certainly dominated the narrative of this type. More significantly, what characterised this type was the comparative absence of connections and networks outside those offered by their working conditions. The narration of their work described an ideal model of academic professionalism related with the 'homo academicus' model (Bourdieu, 1984).

The second category and the third categories are related directly with Gibbons (*et al.*, 1994) knowledge production theory. According to Gibbons (*et al.*) 'mode 1' academic work is usually conducted within the legitimation and valuation structures of epistemic communities – whether disciplines, specialised subfields (Becher, Trowler, 2001) or interdisciplinary domains (Henkel, 2009), and 'mode 2' work is problem-oriented and characterised by intersecting influences of 'external' structures of legitimation and valuation, coming from the public, private and civil society sectors.

The ECR represented by Mode 1 of academic identity share with the previous one a passion for knowledge, and enjoyment derived from the process of conducting research, the primary difference is that Mode 1 Academic frequently refers to the very specific activities aimed at the advancement of science, and – however, this is not the dominant motivation – their scientific careers. These activities may involve seeking individual funding and development opportunities, but they are always conducted within an academic community that one either joins or creates. Belonging to spaces of communal epistemic advancement is the chief distinguishing quality of this type. Unlike the Individualist, for the representatives of the Mode 1 Academic, the work environment is extremely important, as is the collegiality and support within it – support sought (mostly for the Aspiring subtype) but also provided to others (for the Established subtype). This type seeks academic tribes and alliances, whether these are discipline- (Becher, 1989) or 'domain-' (interdisciplinary and topic-based, as per Henkel (2009)) oriented. The ECRs represented by Mode1 have a great level of attachment to the Humboldtian (close relationship between research and teaching) ideal, strong commitment to building the research culture and programmes

within and outside of the institution, and supporting new generations of scholars (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019).

The third identity is represented by the Mode 2 of academic identity. The ECR represented by the Mode2 of academic identity focuses on research activities, despite significant differences in age, nationalities and mobility patterns within this group, commonalities in how they orient themselves in the academic landscape are striking: they can be described as very entrepreneurial, proactive, strategic and pragmatic, including in the choice of topics of research, or a highly ranked institution within which to pursue their research (Djerasimovic, Villani 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In relation to the new mechanisms of evaluation, entry and career consolidation, a change has taken place in a short time and of enormous intensity, involving everyone who lives and works, or wants to enter, the academic world. In response to these changes, adaptive strategies are varied and cannot be traced to a single model. Just as trajectories pluralise and fragment, the individual responses that emerge from academic biographies are also highly diverse.

As quantitative (Giancola, Toscano, 2017; Colarusso, Giancola, 2020b) and qualitative (Djerasimovic, Villani, 2019; Colarusso, Giancola, 2020a) studies have found, entry opportunities have narrowed dramatically. The academic biographies that we collected tell us that new researchers face old and new obstacles.

First of all the construction of academic identity takes on varying connotations based on positioning in the field (Bourdieu, 1984), based on relational capital, the individual professional project (Giddens, 1991) and the ability to put pressure on the professor of reference (Normand, 2016).

Secondly, academic acceleration dramatically impacts life paths and choices. Biographies thus tell of an ongoing tension of re-subjectification, in which researchers continually attempt to reconstruct an identity puzzle as the pieces continually change. However, it is evident that academic socialisation (in terms of a scholar's relationship with the sub-disciplines and positioning with respect to the hierarchical system of power) is configured as an increasingly open, competitive field in which sense-making (Martucelli, 2007; Moscati, 2020) is added to efforts to gain a non-precarious academic position.

Finally, we argue that the effects of this reconfiguration impact, therefore, not only on the modes of production of science but also on the profound sense of university work and, by extension, of the university itself.

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