

# Generation Precarious

Exploring the relationship between working conditions for early-career researchers and the quality of teaching and research



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EAIR – The European Higher Education Society, is an international association for higher education researchers, practitioners, students, managers and policy-makers with an ambition to link research, practice and policy.

NAR (Norwegian Association of Researchers) has a yearlong tradition attending the Forum – to learn and to bring the voice of the union to the table.

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## Sammendrag

De siste tiårene har forskning og høyere utdanning vært gjenstand for gjennomgripende endringer på verdensbasis. Stikkord er en sterk økning i antall studenter og doktorgradskandidater, stedvis stor reduksjon i offentlig bevilgninger, økt konkurranse om eksterne midler, endringer i styringsformer og institusjonell autonomi. Trendene har stor betydning for vitenskapelig ansattes arbeidsbetingelser og karriere. Særlig utsatt er forskere i etableringsfasen, som opplever økende krav til publiseringer, tidsavgrensede kontrakter, utfordrende arbeidsvilkår og i mange tilfeller høyst usikre framtidsutsikter. De er «Generation Precarious».

Høyere utdanning og forskning er grunnleggende viktig for å løse de mange store samfunnsutfordringene vi står overfor, og tillegges stadig mer vekt av myndigheter og sentrale aktører verden over. Så også i Norge. Samtidig er det en økende bekymring for konsekvensene av det som ofte refereres til som «casualization of the academic workforce». Det er gjort en rekke studier av dette og i denne publikasjonen ser vi nærmere på hva vi vet om sammenhengen mellom arbeidsvilkår på den ene siden og kvalitet i utdanning og forskning på den andre. Vårt hovedfokus er situasjonen i Europa og Norge.

Det er selvsagt store variasjoner i vilkårene internasjonalt, men vi kan identifisere en trend som også gjør seg gjeldende i Norge. Mange midlertidige forskere og undervisere opplever seg ikke som en del av kollegiet, de har dårligere fasiliteter og muligheter til faglig oppdatering. I mange land får de heller ikke tilgang til sosiale ordninger som sykepenger, helseforsikring, pensjonsopptjening mv. Variasjon til tross – likheten ligger i at stadig flere har en løs tilknytningsform til de høyere utdanningsinstitusjonene og at gjennomsnittsalderen for første faste ansettelse øker. Antallet faste stillinger har ikke utviklet seg i takt med antall doktorgradskandidater og postdoktorer. Særlig postdoktorene er blitt midlertidig arbeidskraft i eksternt finansierte forskningsprosjekter og erverver seg i mange tilfeller ikke den nødvendige kompetansen for å kvalifisere seg til faste stillinger.

Flere undersøkelser viser at konsekvensen av usikre ansettelsesforhold er økt stressnivå, dårligere mental helse og mangel på balanse mellom arbeid og fritid. Mange er underbetalt og overarbeidet. Unge forskere opplever å stå i en konkurransesituasjon kjennetegnet av et press om å produsere mer, bedre og raskere. Mye tyder også på at denne situasjonen påvirker kvaliteten på forskning og utdanning negativt. En åpenbar fare er at unge forskertalenter velger bort akademia. Videre viser vår gjennomgang at det er all grunn til å stille spørsmål ved hvorvidt konkurranse om forskningsmidler alltid er kvalitetsfremmende. Tvert imot ser det ut til at «prosjektifiseringen» som følger av konkurransebasert og ofte kortsiktig forskningsfinansiering fører til mindre risiko, dårligere vilkår for kunnskapsakkumulering, innovasjon og akademisk frihet. Dette gjelder selvsagt for sektoren generelt, men også her er unge forskere i midlertidige ansettelsesforhold mer sårbare. Det er pekt på at midlertidigheten påvirker holdninger og atferd. Man velger det trygge, i stedet for å utfordre det etablerte – noe som blant annet gjenspeiles i publiseringsmønstre. Når det gjelder kvalitet i undervisning, tyder flere og flere studier på at arbeidsbetingelsene som gjerne følger med midlertidige ansettelsesforhold har negativ effekt på studentens læring.

Forholdene for unge forskere er langt bedre i Norge enn i mange andre land. Likevel er vårt overordnede budskap at det må være større samsvar mellom den betydning høyere utdanning og forskning tillegges og de arbeidsvilkårene som tilbys unge forskere. Det er behov for et mer bærekraftig høyere utdannings- og forskningssystem hvor det tenkes langsiktig og legges rammer som sikrer rekruttering og gjør forskerkarrieren attraktiv i et livsløpsperspektiv.

## Abstract

### **Generation Precarious – exploring the relationship between working conditions for early-career researchers and the quality of teaching and research**

Casualization is on the rise in higher education institutions (HEI) worldwide, particularly affecting working conditions and career prospects of young academics. They represent a vast pool of talent essential to meet future societal needs, yet this “generation precarious” increasingly questions whether it is worthwhile. In this paper we discuss the consequences of casualization for quality in teaching and research. We will present an overview of studies and surveys on employment terms, working conditions and career prospects for early-stage researchers – the “generation precarious” – in Europe, with a particular eye to Norway. Based on this, we highlight concerns and potential consequences of precarious work and deteriorating working conditions within the higher education system.

## Introduction

In the last two decades, higher education (HE) has undergone profound changes worldwide.<sup>1</sup> These changes involve rapid growth in student enrolment, a general decline in public funding and increased competition between higher education institutions (HEI) over external funding and students, as well as changes in institutional governance. Overall, these developments represent a significant increase in requirements, which inevitably means changes for staff – in terms of expectations, work roles, status, and professional conditions of practice.

This paper gives a synthesis of recent research and surveys on working conditions and career prospects for academic staff, with a particular emphasis on early-career researchers (ECR). We will start by making an environmental scan on a European level but draw on Norway for more in-depth examples. With this evidence at hand, we will address the concerns raised by academics, their unions, and other stakeholders, and discuss the short- and long-term consequences for higher education sector and societies in at large across Europe.

By early-career researchers (ECR) we refer to PhD-candidates, postdocs and other scholars/scientists holding temporary positions corresponding to R1 and R2 in the EU framework.<sup>2</sup> PhD-candidates are generally considered as students, even if they are employed, as is the rule in Scandinavia, and contribute to research and education. The type of research training they undergo are of a temporary nature and accordingly their employment is fixed-term. Our *main* concern in this paper will hence be the precarity beyond the PhD-candidates.

Fixed-term contracts are the new normal and precariousness is one of the defining experiences of academic life – in particular for ECR. They comprise “generation precarious”. We will use the terms precarious, casualization/casual workers and contingent faculty in a broad sense, meaning temporary employees not on tenure track. We fear that the current context of Covid-19 will further visualise some of the negative trends outlined in this paper, making the situation even more crucial for the research precariat. This is suggested in a EURODOC report from a survey among their members during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eurydice 2017, OECD 2017, ILO 2018

<sup>2</sup> EU commission 2011 [Towards a European framework for research careers](#), in which R1 refers to First Stage Researcher (up to the point of PhD and R2 refers to Recognised Researcher (PhD holders or equivalent who are not yet fully independent).

<sup>3</sup> EURODOC 2020 [The aftermath of the pandemic for early career researchers in Europe](#)

## Casualization of the academic workforce

In many countries the last decade, austerity has initiated measures to reduce expenditure on university personnel, particularly among academics and researchers. As we will briefly outline in the following, there has been a decrease in public funding and an escalation in privatisation. We can also detect a significant shift in research funding in particular, with more resources moved from block grant to project-based funding in competitive arenas. A trend has hence emerged to replace the civil-servant or permanent employment status of academics with short-term contractual relationships between the university and individual faculty member. The increasing proportion of precarious work and deteriorating working conditions among academic staff world-wide is well documented, from research literature, surveys facilitated by unions, reports, and calls from stakeholders, from blogs and social media.<sup>4</sup>

The US represents an extreme example of the conditions previously outlined, where 3 % of faculty appointments were off the tenure track in 1969, whereas by 2014 this number had reached 70 %.<sup>5</sup> The growth of casualized faculty is also very evident in Europe, with similar developments. According to figures presented by the European Commission, Latvia and Slovakia have no permanent academic posts at all, and in Germany, Estonia, Austria, Finland and Serbia there are no more than 30 % of academic staff with tenure.<sup>6</sup> The national statistics do not always contain strictly comparable figures, and some national authorities do not collect such data, but it seems that in most other countries, between 30 and 50 % of the academic staff (post PhD) are on fixed-term contracts.<sup>7</sup> A study conducted by Clark (2015) based on data from academics belonging to ten European teachers unions, found that 48% of the respondents did not have permanent contracts, even though the majority were employed full time.

In Europe, there has been a significant increase in ECR in the last decades – also proportionately compared with senior and tenure research posts.<sup>8</sup> A substantial number of European academics and the vast majority of the young researchers are accordingly without job security and long-term prospective for their scholarly work. Neither are they well prepared for future work. A survey conducted by the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc) among their affiliates in Europe, indicates that very few have been given adequate career counselling.<sup>9</sup>

The recent trend is that individual researchers attain their first permanent position at an older average age than what was common a few years ago, and the traditional path from PhD, via postdoc to full-time tenure teaching and research post has become the exception rather than the norm.<sup>10</sup> A prevailing belief persists that “post-doctoral researchers are in a phase of intellectual enrichment, but recent research has demonstrated that there is a tendency for them to move from one fixed-term post to another, often requiring a geographical move, which can create work life balance issues”.<sup>11</sup> A survey in the Netherlands, for instance, indicates that only 20 % of all postdocs gets an appointment as assistant professor.<sup>12</sup>

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4 e.g. Clarke 2015; Eurydice 2017; Stromquist 2017; ILO 2018; Wöhler 2014.

5 AAUP 2018. Between 1995 and 2009, 92.4 % of the increase in faculty appointments was due to growth in casual faculty. Stromquist (2017) for similar figures for Australia.

6 Eurydice 2017:62.

7 E.g. Denmark (42 %), the UK (33 %) and Sweden (33 %). National statistics can be found here: DK [Statens lønoverblik](#); UK [HESA Higher education staff statistics UK 2017/18](#); SW Universitetskanslersämbetet [Tidsbe-gränsade anställningar bland högskolans forskande och undervisande personal](#) (2018:11).

8 Hershberg, Benschop & van den Brink 2018.

9 Eurodoc Survey I 2011.

10 G. Marini, W. Locke & C. Whitchurch 2019, p. 9-10 with further references.

11 Op.cit. p. 9

12 Rathenau Instituut, 2016.

A growing number of these academics are temporarily employed outside a recognized career path. Accordingly, they do not get access to career-developing measures, such as sabbatical leave, continuing professional development (CPD) and support resources. Some are also denied of social benefits such as sick leave, medical insurance, and pension. This new form of employment leads to disassociation from institutional governance and academic decision-making, and also poor recognition by institutional leaders and tenured peers.<sup>13</sup>

## The Norwegian experience – a walk in the park?

The backdrop for much of the development in HE in Europe has been the austerity measures after the financial crisis in the late 2000s. However, Norway was largely immune to these fiscal shockwaves. There has been an increase in both private and public funding of research and HE in Norway during the last decade.<sup>14</sup> Norwegian institutions and academics are thus far better off than many of their European colleagues. Despite these funding increases, due to the international character of research and the influence of EU policies and neo-liberal political ideas, also in Norway, we see the same trends of casualization of employment and increased dependence on external funding as is evident throughout Europe and the Western World.

In Norway, we can see a steep increase in early stage academics the last two decades. In Norwegian universities there were 469 postdocs and 2 380 employed as PhD candidates in 2002, whereas in 2018 the figures had increased to 1 555 and 5 595 respectively.<sup>15</sup> The number of regular academic staff (not necessarily in tenured positions) had increased from 10 255 to 14 291 in the same period. The ratio between regular academic staff and recruitment staff had thus decreased from 3.6 to 2.0 between 2002 and 2018.

Not counting PhD candidates 28 % of the academic personnel in public Norwegian HEI are temporarily employed.<sup>16</sup> This is slightly lower than in the rest of Europe, as mentioned above. Considered the low rate of unemployment in Norway (3.5 %) and that only 7.4 % of the Norwegian workforce are temporarily employed, however, the figures are worrying.<sup>17</sup>

Today a small, and decreasing, number of postdocs in Norway end up in permanent academic positions. For those employed in a postdoc position in 2001, 28 % held a tenure academic position five years later (and about 40 % after 12 years), whereas only 18 % of the 2009 postdoc cohort had gain a tenure academic position after five years.<sup>18</sup> Researchers from the STEM fields find it hardest to get tenure. Since hospitals and public research institutions also employ early stage researchers on temporary basis, there is no general “demand” for research labour outside academia in Norway. Many leave research altogether.

For early career Norwegian researchers there is often a real gap between expectations and lived experience. A survey among PhD candidates in 2017 revealed that approximately two in three wanted a future career in research, but 80 % have not received any career information or advice.<sup>19</sup> The current situation has led to frustration and resignation among a number of early stage researchers. This cohort of young academics consider an academic career less attractive, as is evident from several recent surveys. A majority of postdoctoral researchers answering the *Academic professions in a Knowledge Society* (APIKS) survey claimed that it is

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13 Clarke 2015, ILO 2018.

14 [Indikatorrapporten 2020](#).

15 These figures are FTEs in the postdoc position code (1352) and PhD candidate (position code 1017 and 1378) in HEI only, not counting other research position codes on the same level. This includes the PhD candidates who are employed by the HEL, not all registered PhD candidates. The total number of PhD candidates enrolled in PhD programmes in Norway was 4 123 in 2002 and 10 773 fifteen years later in 2017. All figures from the [Norwegian Database for Statistics on Higher Education \(DBH\)](#).

16 Figures from the [Norwegian Database for Statistics on Higher Education \(DBH\)](#).

17 Figures from [Statistics Norway](#).

18 [NIFU Arbeidsnotat 2015:15](#)

19 [NIFU-rapport 2017:10](#)

currently not a good time to start an academic career; one out of three goes as far as to state that they regret their career choice.<sup>20</sup> In another survey conducted by The Young Academy of Norway, only half of the young researchers would recommend a research career to young people – and women to a lesser extent than men.<sup>21</sup> This survey also signals a lack of belief in a future research career – a majority expects to be leaving research within the next ten years and only 1 in 5 expect ever to get a permanent research position. A small minority of the respondents believe they have received adequate training to pursue a career in other sectors. 1 in 4 have experienced periods of unemployment between casual contracts. Long-term casualization leads to bewilderment, but also discontent and anxiety:

Postdocs and senior researchers in temporary positions feel like they have fewer rights and feel less appreciated than permanent researchers at the same institution. In addition, they emphasize the psychological and social burden associated with an uncertain job situation and the continuous stress associated with having to secure the next project or position.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the ECR identify significant impediments to the promise of a vibrant academic career:

- Unsupported career paths with arbitrary assessment criteria for promotion
- Arduous (and sometimes unfair) competition for funding and positions
- Unclear roles and duties, with excessive dependence on group leaders and a lack of academic role models different than professors
- Short-term research planning and lack of sustained funding supports

Based on the evidence from Europe, and Norway, we see ahead a twofold strategic challenge regarding precariousness and deteriorating working conditions for ECR. A research career within academia becomes increasingly less attractive for those who have viable job alternatives outside HEI. For some disciplines, recruiting the best talents is thus a challenge. This problem may be more critical in countries with a large share of aging academic staff. For other disciplines, with a more limited relevant job market outside academia, the large number of research candidates seems to instigate demanding competition and longer paths to tenure - hence enlarging the problem.

## Precariousness and concerns at individual level

Times Higher Education's first major global survey on university staff finds academics feeling stressed and underpaid, and struggling to fit time for personal relationships and family around ever-growing workloads.<sup>23</sup> 85 % of the respondents have considered finding work in another sector, believing it would lead to less stress and improved work-life balance. Yet, career mobility into other sectors is not a simple undertaking. ECR often experience to find themselves in positions where they are underqualified for academic posts and overqualified for the outside job market, yet lacking the proper qualifications and experience needed for other jobs.<sup>24</sup> The labour market is thus limited for a large number of academics; which leads to a more or less conscious exploitation of their working capacity. Many academics work for free or clearly underpaid to get "relevant experience" or in hope of future employment if being seen as eager. Others do not get full-time occupation but teach classes on hourly basis or conduct short-time lab work. Either way, they find it hard to make a living and struggle to unionize on basic labour rights.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [NIFU-rapport 2019:2](#), p. 45-47.

<sup>21</sup> The Young Academy of Norway 2018

<sup>22</sup> The Young Academy of Norway 2018; p.3

<sup>23</sup> THE report 2018. See also Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet (2020)

<sup>24</sup> Curaj et al. 2015; See also Carrie Arnold in [Sciencemag 2014/10](#) and Anonymous academic in [The Guardian 25.08.2017](#).

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/us-labour-board-moves-ban-graduate-teaching-assistant-unions>.

Even the ECR that are full-time employed, will find that they seldom are in a position to negotiate salaries and that their friends and former co-students will have better wages, higher expected life-time income, and larger retirement pensions. In a number of countries (e.g. UK, Italy, Ireland, Germany) HE teachers' salaries have declined over the last decade.<sup>26</sup> In UK universities and colleges, more than two-fifths of staff on casual contracts have struggled to pay household bills.<sup>27</sup> In Norway there is evidence that researchers in the public HE sector are lagging behind compared to research colleagues in the private sector. Furthermore, in general the payoff for qualifying at doctoral level is low, when compared to other categories of non-doctoral holders, but still highly educated employees.<sup>28</sup> The fact that our most talented and hard-working people – on which we rely to solve our common challenges and teach the next generation of knowledge workers – end up underpaid, is a syntax error.

Another alarming aspect on an individual level is the reports on mental health issues among ECR. Several studies indicate that many in this cohort not only struggle to find a work-life-balance but are over-represented in the statistics of employees suffering from stress, depression and other types of mental illness.<sup>29</sup> As stated by Maria do Mar Pereira:

It is no longer a (thinly veiled) secret that in contemporary universities many scholars, both junior and senior, are struggling – struggling to manage their workloads; struggling to keep up with insistent institutional demands to produce more, better and faster; struggling to reconcile professional demands with family responsibilities and personal interests; and struggling to maintain their physical and psychological health and emotional wellbeing.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, it is not sustainable for the HE and research sector that a large number of ECR are underpaid and bewildered, deprived of labour rights and co-determination, and suffer from diminished motivation, depression and mental health issues. HEIs of Europe should not be acquainted nor satisfied with this. If they are not moved by the disquieting conditions for young academics, they should be worried about the consequences casualization may have for the quality of research and education.

## Jeopardizing quality in research and teaching

Although we acknowledge that further research and evidence is needed, we underscore the importance of addressing the well-documented negative impacts that characterize the casualization of Europe's academic work-force, particularly ECR.

### **Loss of talent**

It is evident that the lack of adequate support, the economic demand for mobility and the insecure working conditions lead to loss of talent. A large number of also successful and talented researchers deem academia less attractive and leave universities.<sup>31</sup> A fresh PhD Survey from Leibniz exemplifies this. Nearly half of the doctoral researchers have thought about not continuing their doctorate; the major reason for doing so being an unclear career path (66%). 3 in 4 hold that working in academia creates too much financial uncertainty, and a majority believes that it requires them to move too often.<sup>32</sup> HEI must ponder whether it is the most talented or the most resilient researchers they end up fostering and retaining.

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<sup>26</sup> Stromquist 2017:11.

<sup>27</sup> UCU 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Skorge & Umblijs 2017:3

<sup>29</sup> Levecqueet et al 2016; Opstrup & Pihl-Thingvad 2016; Clarke 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Maria do Mar Pereira 2016:100.

<sup>31</sup> *Higher Education Policy, suppl. Special Issue: Early Career Researchers and Changing* 2014; Herschberg et al 2018, Skovgaard Pedersen 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Arcudi et al. 2019.



### **Competitive funding, competitive climate**

A high proportion of external funding is considered a vital success criterion for HEI, even though concerns have been raised about the consequences this may have for academic freedom and education. It has been argued, and all too often unproblematically taken for granted, that there is a strong correlation between competition for external funding and quality in research. The downside of this – casualized work and increased bureaucracy – has been considered necessary, if not desired. However, a number of studies have questioned the correlation between quality and competition for grants and external funding, at least the way this is currently conducted.<sup>33</sup> A study by Sandström & Van den Besselaar (2018) suggest that the most efficient research systems are characterized by “a well-developed *ex post* evaluation system combined with considerably high institutional funding and relatively low university autonomy (meaning a high autonomy of professionals).” This in contrast to systems with “a high level of so-called competitive project funding, or through strong power of the university management”.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, a recent study of the impact of the Excellence Initiative (EI) in Germany, a policy intervention aimed to promote and select outstanding active research universities by competitively allocating additional public funds, indicates that the effect is a general negative trend for research quality since the strive for visibility and excellence puts a pressure on academics to “salami-slice” research projects into multiple weaker publications.<sup>35</sup>

It is due time to question the demand for strong research management and whether fervent competition for project-based funding through applications in large-scale programmes is the best use of scarce resources.

### **Projectification and low-risk research**

Today’s research funding leads to ‘projectification’ and short-term thinking. The whole idea being to convince a panel of experts that the applicants are able to conduct exactly the kind of research project they apply funding for, within a limited time-frame, with predictable results and societal impact. A major problem throughout, is also that these research projects are staffed with ECR on fixed-term contracts. These are typically postdoctoral holders aiming for an academic career, whereas what is needed and sought for is project research work. The prosperous postdoctor with her own ideas will either not get selected for the position or not be able to develop necessary skills for the next step. Principal investigators tend to look for good project workers rather than the best talented academics, according to a study by Hersschberg, Benschop and van den Brink (2018):

We conclude that the projectification of early academic positions resulted in recruitment and selection practices that focus on short-term objectives. This reveals a sharp contrast with the emphasis on academic excellence and talent that dominates the debate on the neoliberal academy [...] and academic evaluation and hiring decisions.

The responsibility for career development has shifted from employers to the ECR themselves. Since they are not provided with “sufficient opportunities for development and progression”, however, this is a responsibility they cannot bear. The ECR habitually work on series of fixed-term contracts in various projects and “end up with a scattered research line instead of an independently developed, coherent research line that is required for a next – more stable – position”. It makes it difficult to develop an independent research profile and to invest in long-term and innovative research projects.

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33 E.g. Stromquist 2017 and Ivancheva 2015

34 Sandström & Van den Besselaar 2018.

35 Civera et al. 2020.

A consequence of this ‘projectification’ of research is discontinuity. Researchers and research groups must recurrently apply for new funding and move on to different short-term projects in order to make a living. Everybody knows that good research takes time and concentration, yet the system endows ‘fast food’ research. A slow science movement has been proposed.<sup>36</sup>

Another consequence of this sort of discontinuity is scarce networking and collaborations. ECR finds it difficult to build lasting research networks, as few wants to cooperate with someone who might be out of work and position the next year. As concluded by Herschberg, Benschop and van den Brink (2018), this “current short-term orientation might not be sustainable on the long run, for both the careers of postdocs and the quality of knowledge production in academia”.

With an increasing share of research funding coming from competition arenas, which moreover is being determined on political or commercial grounds, the balance between freedom of research, society’s needs, and commercial interests is being skewed. In a large European survey on academic freedom in Europe, 2 in 3 agree or strongly agree that “having to apply for funds for specific projects stops me from choosing topics that my ‘academic instinct’ tells me are worthwhile”.<sup>37</sup> This, at least, shows lost potential for good basic research.

### ***Preventing innovation, creating copycats***

There is a clear contradiction between the ideals of research as critical, ground-breaking and revealing some deep truth, which needs concentration and contemplation, and a system that is focused on short-term research and output. Paula Stephan has shown how privatization and ‘projectification’ of research leads to low-risk research and how this ultimately will decrease the rate of innovation and lower the prospect for economic growth.<sup>38</sup>

Along this line, David Nicholas (2016) argues how precariousness shape scholarly attitudes and behaviours. The study, focusing particularly on open science and new possibilities for collaboration and sharing of research, sees young scholars as digital natives with a natural inclination to think and behave more expansively, innovatively, and publicly. However, they find themselves stuck in the middle, working in a highly competitive system of rewards and reputation, having to publish more, at a younger age and in more prestigious journals than their seniors needed. They would like to change the publishing patterns, they would like to see more collaboration and sharing, but feel they do not have the authority to challenge the norms deeply embedded in academia and fear collaboration will decrease their competitive edge. So instead of fostering change, they become copycats of senior staff.<sup>39</sup> Nicholas concludes the solution is to make their circumstances less precarious:

In that way, young researchers might dare to do more original, creative and transformative research, even at the risk of missing out on publishing in top journals; adopt novel dissemination strategies, use more time to explore the scholarly opportunities (...) and act more independently of their seniors.<sup>40</sup>

Repression of youthful creativity and novel ideas is fatal to any innovative society. It seems our present research systems are in danger of doing just that.

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36 Stengers 2017

37 From a conference presentation by Terence Karran, “The Realities of Academic Freedom”, in Oslo 17<sup>th</sup> November 2015.

38 Stephan 2015.

39 Harbingers 2016.

40 Nicholas 2016:8.

### ***Limiting academic freedom***

Academic freedom is incontestably essential to HEIs and the research system, as critical and independent research and education is essential for any society. Furthermore, scientists are more efficient at producing high-quality research when they have more academic freedom, according to the study by Sandström & Van den Besselaar (2018). Researchers should not have to fear retribution or loss of work for communicating controversial results of research. This is precisely what makes academic freedom so important and why it is closely connected to tenure. The 1997 UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel plainly states:

Tenure or its functional equivalent, where applicable, constitutes one of the major procedural safeguards of academic freedom and against arbitrary decisions. It also encourages individual responsibility and the retention of talented higher-education teaching personnel.

Today, temporary employees face a significant degree of job insecurity, which inevitably will cause more or less conscious precaution regarding research – from the choosing of topics to the publication of results. Their future careers will most often be best served by short-term and “safe” research, as stated above, where they can be relatively certain of the results that will be achieved within the deadline. Moreover, controversial conclusions that could ruffle the feathers of established researchers and institutional leaders are to be avoided, as these are the very people who will next arbitrate their work and thus control future employment prospects.

ECR on temporary basis can furthermore be exposed to “intellectual bullying”, where established researchers exert undue pressure on their research publication, by unfairly claiming greater authorship than they deserve, denying the use of data for certain types of conclusions and similar crass behaviour. This contravenes high quality research and publication practice, but due to the competitive system may be a growing problem. In a recent report from Sweden, one in four doctoral candidates stated that their research results had been used in a way that goes against good research practice.<sup>41</sup>

If academic freedom is essential to research and HE, and tenure is essential to academic freedom, tenure should be essential for HEI. Surely, this is ultimately an issue of quality and public trust.

### ***Negative effects on teaching and learning***

Given the significant level of casualization, there is an increasing dependence on casual or seasonal staff engaged in activities related to student learning such as lecturing, tutoring and assessment. In many countries the solution to enrolment growth without a corresponding growth in resources, has been to hire part-time faculty – at least in the eyes of the university.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the prevailing discourse on higher education has raised a voice concerning quality, equality, and equity, mainly centered on students. Until more recently, such discussions have remained relatively silent on the working conditions of higher education personnel as crucial to the teaching and learning process.<sup>43</sup> Over the last two decades, there has also been a rapid development of quality assurance systems. Again, these are typically focused on student outcomes, whereas human resource management or quality assurance mechanisms addressing the working conditions of academic personnel are few or often neglected.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Swedish Higher Education Authority 2016.

<sup>42</sup> ILO 2018

<sup>43</sup> Stromquist 2017

<sup>44</sup> Eurydice 2017

There is now a growing body of evidence suggesting rising numbers of contingent faculty are negatively affecting students learning and success.<sup>45</sup> When exploring this Kezar et al (2014) found that poor working conditions and a lack of support diminish contingent faculties' capacity to provide a high-quality learning environment and experience for students. The cumulative effect of deteriorating working conditions impedes individual instructor's abilities to interact with students and apply their many talents, creativity, and subject knowledge to maximum effect inside and outside the classroom. From the US, there are also clear indications that employment in insecure part-time contracts have negative effects on both retention rates and graduate outcomes.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the growth in contingent teaching staff may work against achieving excellence in teaching because this group are frequently unable to access training and support necessary to develop their teaching and teaching skills or adapt to changing needs.<sup>47</sup> In a recent survey from UK, large majorities of casualized teaching staff reported that they have inadequate paid time to prepare for their classes, mark students work, give students feedback or undertake the scholarship necessary to remain subject specialists.<sup>48</sup>

The increasing focus on quality indicators of tertiary teaching has raised the importance of training and CPD of teachers. The UK Quality code for Higher Education is an emerging example of national requirements for tertiary teachers to undertake CPD as a means to ensure teaching excellence.<sup>49</sup> Considering the fact that contingent faculty or sessional teachers do not have access to sufficient CPD, this might be crucial for their career prospects.

Another example is Norway, where new demands on documenting teaching experience and skills are introduced as criteria for employment and promotion within HEI.<sup>50</sup> The goal is to foster excellence in teaching. For young academics, this might however constitute another hindrance in the struggle for tenure employment. The doctorate is a requirement for entrance – legally or in reality, to pursue a career in academia. In many countries, pedagogy and teaching are still not covered in graduate program for future academics, meaning that PhD students do not necessarily follow training targeting their teaching skills.<sup>51</sup> This is the case also in Norway.

Another aspect is the disturbing division of labour among contingent and tenured staff or junior or senior academics. Many young scholars without tenure are not expected to focus on research activities or that the time available for research are set at a very minimum. This increasing separation between academics creates an unhealthy division between those who engage in research and those who teach. Hence, the very notion of research-based teaching, which in Norway by law should be the norm, is challenged. This again decreases the quality of teaching since students are less likely to be introduced to knowledge representing the scholarly frontline.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, one could easily argue that the motivation of staff is as important as students' when it comes to success in students' outcomes. This is also one important reason why the number of academic staff on casual contracts is included in the recently reviewed Australian Risk Assessment Framework.<sup>53</sup>

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45 Kezar, Maxey & Badke 2014.

46 Summary of US literature:

[https://pullias.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CHEA\\_Changing\\_Faculty\\_2013.pdf](https://pullias.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CHEA_Changing_Faculty_2013.pdf).

47 Klopper & Power 2014.

48 UCU 2019.

49 Eurydice 2017

50 Norwegian [Regulations concerning appointment and promotion to teaching and research posts](#)

51 Eurydice 2017.

52 Stormqvist 2017. We elaborate further on the link between working conditions and quality in teaching in Iddeng and Norgård (2020).

53 Iddeng & Norgård 2020

## Conclusion – Creating a more sustainable system

Academic freedom and research quality are fundamental to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the trust the citizens of any society place in the education and research these institutions deliver. Job security, long-term commitment and effective quality assurance measures are essential prerequisites to sustain public assurance. The deterioration of working conditions and prospects for young researchers stands in stark contrast to the emphasis put on research, innovation and education by governments and key stakeholders to solve economic and societal challenges. Based on this brief overview of the literature, our working hypothesis has been that the scope of precarious work, severe competition, short-term funding, and uncertainty leads to less attractive careers, less motivated researchers and inevitably a decrease in research quality. The more long-term consequences of this casualization of the academic workforce are moreover weakened social and labour rights.

Evidence-informed advocacy for the importance of supportive and decent working conditions is not a position taken-up by the researchers' unions only. The last two decades, key documents from governmental and cross-national bodies as well as NGOs, underline academic freedom and terms of employment as crucial for quality in teaching and research. The UNESCO recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (adopted in 1997) addresses four core values, among them terms and conditions of employment. In 2005, the European Commission adopted a European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. These two documents, addressed to researchers as well as research employers and funders in both the public and private sectors, are key elements in the EU's policy to boost researchers' careers (EU 2015). In the Bologna process, the ministers state, "As high quality teaching is essential in fostering high quality education, academic career progression should be built on successful research and quality teaching".<sup>54</sup> Finally, the modernization agenda of the EU Commission states, "the reform and modernization of Europe's higher education depends on the competence and motivation of teachers and researchers".<sup>55</sup> The Commission calls for improved working conditions including transparent and fair recruitment procedures, better initial and continuing professional development, and enhanced recognition and rewards for teaching and research excellence. Finally, in May 2019, Eurodoc and the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) hence presented their [\*Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers\*](#), calling for improved working and employment conditions.

There are emerging signs that some European governments and some research and HE systems start taking these issues more seriously. From our own country (Norway), we know the government and HEI leaders are increasingly aware of the negative impacts of casualization, due to the ongoing focus our trade union and other organisations have put on these issues. We have also detected a willingness to take steps to reduce precariousness among researchers. Given the pressure and, at times, conflicting forces of internationalization, competitive project-based funding, and the mantra of 'individual excellence', it is difficult to determine whether or not our country will be able to respond in a timely manner. As we have indicated throughout this paper, the Norwegian research community are subject to similar influences and challenges as their colleagues globally. They are encountering the same public policy questions many countries are facing. These include some of the more pragmatic issues such as determining the adequacy of sustained funding for the tertiary sector, to more existential questions surrounding the proper role of the university in society and the public's responsibility to provide the research capacity that will engage the vexing challenges of our times.

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<sup>54</sup> Paris Communiqué, EHEA ministerial conference 2018.

<sup>55</sup> EU Commission 2017 *A renewed EU agenda for higher education*.

At the institutional level, academic leaders do also seem to acknowledge a need for change and the importance of optimizing support for early-career researchers. They are, however, a part of the problem. Until higher education employers' policies actually change, these ECR's precarious position will continue to have a negative effect on teaching, research and innovation. Academic leaders must acknowledge ECR's considerable contributions to academic knowledge production and the concern of many parties and stakeholders and advocate for funding that aligns with the expectations set out by the governments and society as such. Moreover, research communities in general must of course play a key role in advocacy and building public awareness about the critical role that research and knowledge mobilization plays in creating vibrant societies.

Increased public funding is key to foster more sustainable working conditions, career prospects and quality in teaching and research. Sound competition is essential also for HEI. Yet, the world needs more cooperation, exchange of ideas, tolerance, and democracy – and so does HE and the research system. More competitive arenas with high gain for the winners, will lead in the opposite direction, including attempts to rig the system and unfair play, and with more money being spent on trying to win the competition, which will instigate more money used on governing the competition and monitoring the competitors. We hold that HEI and governments would benefit from striking the better balance between competition, freedom and cooperation. There is an apprehensible reluctance to make radical changes on a national level only. This is an international problem, which needs international solutions. Europe can lead the way.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has already called for more research on the effect of casualization, and has recently initiated a project, “The Precarity of Research Careers”, addressing the consequences of deteriorating working conditions for academic researchers.<sup>56</sup> We will urge all parties involved to help widen our knowledge on this. Even though we appreciate more research and involvement from stakeholders such as the OECD, we know enough to act. The European Union, the individual governments and the HEI leaders can easily start to ‘walk the talk’.

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/sti/science-technology-innovation-outlook/research-precariat/>

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