

# NAVIGATORS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Professional strategies and identity constructions  
among early-career academics

by **Joakim Ekman**

## abstract

Drawing on in-depth interviews, this essay investigates professional strategies and researcher identity constructions in the precarious postdoctoral phase. The analysis indicates that most of the informants in the present study seem to be somewhere in the middle of the process of establishing a postdoctoral/early-career identity. The essay underlines the need for better preparing PhD students for the postdoctoral phase; and suggests that to most of the informants, the emerging researcher identities are secondary to more pressing issues, relating to survival in academia altogether.

**KEYWORDS:** Early-career researcher, postdoctoral identity construction, socialization.

**E**arly-career academics are not seldom described as a vulnerable group in academia; existing in uncertainty between recently having become a “somebody” after a successful PhD defense but at the same time not having secured a stable employment, thus remaining a “nobody”. The transition from PhD student to postdoctoral researcher is often described as a process characterized by uncertainty, tension, and sometimes feelings of self-doubt.<sup>1</sup> Recently, Swedish education scientist Jonatan Nästesjö has investigated this particular group and how individuals seek to demonstrate their worth in order to be recognized by others and advance in their careers. Nästesjö refers to this as “navigating evaluative landscapes”, which includes decisions about where to publish, what to publish, who to turn to for advice, and how to strike a balance between institutional career demands and individual aspirations.<sup>2</sup> This process of learning the ropes also has to do with establishing your own identity as a researcher.

AT SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, Stockholm, most (but not all) PhD students belong to the Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS), founded in 2000 and funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (*Östersjöstiftelsen*). Every year, a number of doctoral students are admitted to this essentially multidisciplinary research environment. As a BEEGS alumni, the postdoctoral period is characterized by the same challenges that face all early-career academics. The

Table 1. Aspects of researcher identity constructions

Assessment of the initial postdoctoral phase	Mentors and role models	Publication strategy	Demands and expectations and individual aspiration	Researcher self-image
General assessment (hard/easy)?  Specific problems or issues?	Advise on how to “navigate” from whom?	Strategic publishing or a mixed publication strategy?	How to be a professional researcher and how to stay true to own ideals or goals?	Self-image in relation to discipline or in relation to specific geographical area or specific topic?

distinctive difference is that that a BEEGS alumni will have some kind of area studies profile, since this is a requirement for being admitted to the doctoral programme in the first place; a profile that relate the area of expertise to the Baltic Sea region or Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on interviews with early-career academics from different disciplines and fields, this essay analyses professional strategies and researcher identity constructions in the postdoctoral phase. The idea is also to investigate how the special emphasis on regional studies of the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe found at Södertörn University matter (or does not matter) for the “navigation” of the early-career period. Is the area studies profile important for the postdoctoral identity, or is the researcher identity more closely related to one’s disciplinary belonging? Or, is the self-perception is this particular respect secondary to more pressing issues relating to survival in academia altogether?

## Interviews and analytical framework

The interviews were conducted in April and early May 2024. The idea was not to get hold of a representative sample of all postdoctoral researchers at Södertörn University, but rather to select individuals from different academic disciplines and with some early-career work experience. To reduce possible biases related to seniority, the idea was initially to include only those who defended in 2020–2022. Using the word “seniority” in this context, when focusing on postdoctoral researchers, may seem counterintuitive. However, it is quite possible to become “established” as a researcher within a few years after the doctoral defense, even if you don’t have a permanent position. Or, you can of course be established in some other field already when starting as a PhD student.

**THE IDEA TO FOCUS** exclusively on researchers awarded a doctoral title in 2020–2022 was abandoned after the initial interviews, as it became clear that it made sense to include both individuals with a bit more as well as a little less work experience, for comparative reasons. The present investigation also covers three “seniors”, having establishing themselves in different professional fields before or during their PhD training; alongside individuals with only very little postdoctoral experience. Moreover, two non-BEEGS researchers participated in the interviews. A total of 12 interviews were conducted; the most “junior” respondents defended their theses in 2024, and the most senior defended in 2018 (see Appendix 1). The interviews encompassed early-career

researchers affiliated with Södertörn University as well as researchers with other university affiliations.

The interviews were arranged in a conventional semi-structured form, with a pre-determined set of open questions and room for the interviewer to explore or follow up on responses and themes. The interviews covered the following topics: (1) assessment of the initial postdoctoral phase; (2) the role of mentors and role models; (3) chosen publication strategy; (4) awareness and management of expectations; and (5) self-image in relation to one’s discipline and chosen field of research. The initial assumption was that these five aspects would include experiences related to teaching, applying for positions, participation in research projects, external networks, gender issues and imagined future career paths.

**TAKEN TOGETHER**, the different aspects make up an analytical framework, that may be used to depict the identity constructions of early-career researchers (Table 1). Another expectation was from the outset that one would find differences across disciplines when it comes to the aspects included in Table 1. Using the notion of the postdoctoral period as a socialization process,<sup>4</sup> one could assume that some disciplines would have stronger ideas than others about the correct way of being a researcher and what one should focus on as a “junior” (what is good, what is desirable, and what to avoid, and so on).

## The precarious postdoctoral existence

In Sweden, there are a few different options or possibilities for early-career researchers (in the humanities and the social sciences). The first is to get a postdoctoral researcher position, which is not so easy. Such positions are rather scarce, and competition is hard. Typically, these are 2-year positions, and typically, once your two years are over, the university will not offer you anything else. The second path is to teach: you can become a non-permanent part of the faculty, teaching “on hours” (but only if there is a need for this at your department). It is an insecure existence, where planning tends to be semester-to-semester. Sometimes you are offered teaching only on part-time (which would mean that you get paid only a part-time salary); and, if you actually are invited to teach on, say, 85 to 100 per cent, it will be very hard for you to conduct research. You will simply be too exhausted from teaching.

**THE THIRD OPTION** or path is to get external funding from a research project, where you can strike a nice balance between



time devoted to research and time for teaching. In reality, it will be very hard to get funding for a research project on your own (as a PI), as an early-career researcher, so the project path depends on you being invited to join a project led by a more senior colleague. In this case, your salary comes from the project (based on your time for doing research) and from your department (based on hours of teaching).

Another thing to consider for a postdoctor with temporal employments are the Swedish employment regulations, which are not really compatible with short-term contracts. The general rule of the Swedish Employment Protection Act (LAS) is that employments should be permanent, unless certain conditions apply, which allows short-term employments (fixed-term contracts, substitutes and seasonal employment). The act is designed to protect employees, but for young academics, the act does in fact function as a roadblock. In order to avoid that short-term teaching contracts automatically become permanent employments, the universities quite often “kick out” individuals before that happens (i.e. by avoiding the prolongation of short-term contracts). Thus, having short-term contracts is not really a viable solution.

**THE FOURTH CAREER** path is to get a permanent position as a *lektor* (or as an assistant/junior lecturer). A lecturer basically means “university teacher”, and teaching is often the what it is mainly about. Time for research may be included in the position (different universities in Sweden offer different deals in this respect); but most often, proper time for research will depend on your ability to compete for external research funding. And of course, for someone who just have defended his/her thesis, it is very hard to get a position as a lecturer (or even assistant lecturer). Competition is very hard, and you need to have both teaching experience and publications on your resume.

There are other ways of staying in academia after the defence, but the above-mentioned options are probably most common. All in all, a postdoctoral existence at a Swedish university is typically demanding; again, it means finding yourself in a vulnerable or even precarious situation. Similar working conditions are common at other places in Europe, and on top of this comes gender inequality.<sup>5</sup>

**UNEQUALITY BETWEEN** men and women in academia is still very much a reality, in Sweden and elsewhere, despite increasing number of women in academia over the past decades. Repeated political attempts to strengthen gender equality and to create equal opportunities for a successful career have not fundamentally changed the situation.<sup>6</sup> As a rule, male researchers tend to be overrepresented in senior academic positions.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that there are systematic barriers that women encounter in the transition from junior to senior researchers, that have to do with access to resources (research funding, mentorships, and

networks). It is precisely in this transition, after having defended your PhD thesis, that such resources are needed.<sup>8</sup>

## Findings from the interviews

Turning next to the interviews, we will follow the structure displayed in Table 1, covering five aspects of the construction of a researcher identity: assessment of the initial postdoctoral period; the role of mentors and role models; deciding on a publication strategy; awareness and management of expectations; and adopting a subjective researcher identity in relation to your discipline and chosen field of research. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, in English or in Swedish, lasting between 20 and 90 minutes.

### The initial phase

The first topic that was brought up, to start all interviews, was asking about the initial period of no longer being a PhD student. The “initial period” was deliberately left a bit open (but could mean anything between 0 to 24 months). To all informants, the difference between having been a PhD student and being a PhD was distinct, but still a bit hard to describe. The transition came with a void, some said; or a writer’s block, others said. Still, it was clear that most of the informants felt a sense of accomplishment; of having successfully defended their doctoral thesis and could now move on.

One informant remembered feeling that a happy PhD student experience had been replaced by a hectic postdoctoral reality. However, it was more common to describe the transition the other way around, going from a quite stressful PhD student phase to a more relaxed and creative situation as a PhD. To some, this newfound freedom also came with increased status and recognition from the collegium. At the same time, nearly all informants mentioned increased pressure, higher expectations, and demands. One informant noted that the transition entailed more confidence but increased self-awareness: as a PhD student, it was OK to ask about things, to *not* know about various things. As a PhD, she felt that the expectation was that she *should* know. She joked about this, of “not being entitled ask questions” anymore, but it was clear that she felt that expectations from others were higher now, as she was “no longer a student”.

The informants here had all made a conscious decision to stay in academia. That did not mean that all knew exactly what to do next. A few of the informants said that they haven’t made very specific plans after the defense; they felt it was enough just to go with the flow and see what would happen. Only one or two of the early-career academics felt that they came well prepared to the postdoctoral phase, thanks to supervisors who had planned for this existence already before the PhD defense, providing support and “context” (like research projects). Others felt that they had been more or less left on their own, initially.

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Some informants referred to failed applications for postdoc positions in first 12 months after the defense, or to unsecure working conditions due to short-term contracts. One informant said that she, in retrospect, had not been as efficient as she should have; but the same person managed to attract external research funding and secured a postdoc position within 24 months after having defended.

A few of the informants came, as PhD students, from outside of Sweden. For them, a distinct source of external stress after the doctoral defense was related to the Swedish Migration Agency and the issue of residence permits. One of the informants described this issue as overriding all other issues.

### The relative importance of elders

The conventional assumption is that young researchers would look to senior professors for guidance and advice. However, existing studies have demonstrated that the situation looks different in different disciplines. For example, among young political scientists, there is indeed a tendency to consult senior colleagues; but among young historians (at contemporary Swedish universities), the preference is rather to consult colleagues that are not too senior.<sup>9</sup>

A few of informants here, who were political scientists, confirmed this assumption, pointing above all to senior colleagues (and more specifically, former supervisors). Also, the role of former supervisors or other senior colleagues was related to the need for having somebody to provide letters of recommendation or to function as references. However, one of the informants, who was also a political scientist, had a distinctly different experience: it was not at all the former supervisors that were important for getting advice and support, but rather the early-career researchers at her department (her network of peers). It was through them that she learned about postdoctoral opportunities and positions.

**OTHERS WERE INCLINED** to mention both former supervisors and “junior elders”, but it was hard to establish a pattern based on the relatively few interviews in the present study. It was clear from the informant interviews though that (junior) peers had played an important role for most of them, during their time as PhD students (and to some, afterwards).

Two of the informants deviated from the general pattern, naming not former supervisors nor junior colleagues at their own department. Instead, when it came to professional advice, they referred to researchers in their own networks, who knew them, their profiles, and the specific research fields they were active within. Others referred to their close friends and partners.

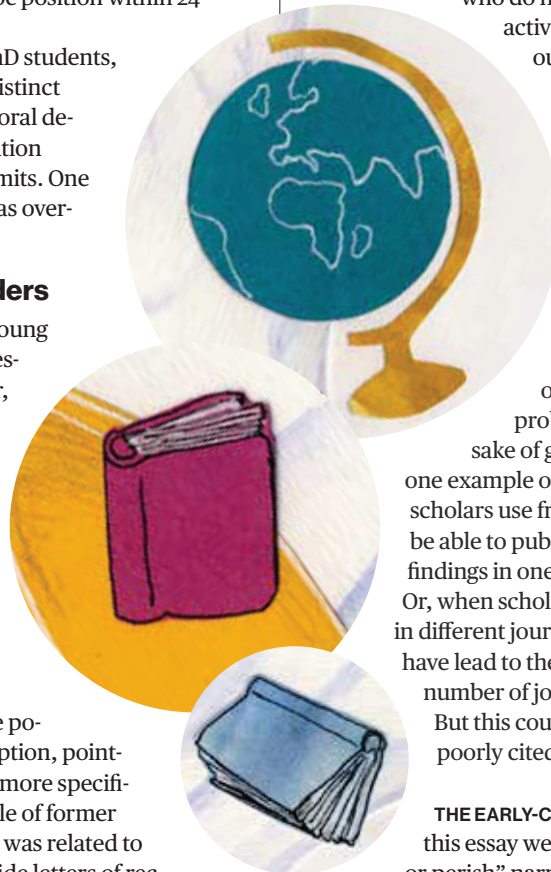
### Publication strategies

Frequent publication is the most common way of demonstrating your worth as a researcher in academia. Also, publications are important to your department or institution since it typically means more funding and/or prestige. Conversely, scholars who do not publish so much or focus on other activities may eventually find themselves outpaced by junior colleagues when competing for external funding or positions.

At the same time, there are plenty of critical voices who have pointed to the downside of the prevalent “publish or perish” ideology. For example, it has been argued that the strong emphasis on publishing has decreased the value of the resulting scholarship; rather than focusing on interesting or relevant research problems, scholars just publish for the sake of getting published. “Salami slicing” is one example of the negative consequences, i.e. when scholars use fragments of their research findings to be able to publish more; instead of presenting the findings in one article, you use two or three articles. Or, when scholars more or less duplicate publications in different journals. Also, the pressure to publish have led to the establishment of an unprecedented number of journals, that publish ever more articles. But this could also mean that most articles become poorly cited, in general.<sup>10</sup>

**THE EARLY-CAREER** academics interviewed in this essay were of course aware of the “publish or perish” narrative: as a postdoctoral researcher, you should publish, end of story. When the informants talked about their respective publication strategies (or perhaps rather, publication patterns so far), they explicitly or implicitly referred to this narrative, for example, when explaining how and why they deviated from this general “recommendation”. Most of the informants felt that publishing in international journals was generally expected of you, and something that was likely to come up when applying for positions and external funding. At the same time, it was perhaps not equally important just where (in what specific journals) you published. One of the early-career researchers did not agree, and explained that she had decided on a publication strategy quite early on after having defended her thesis; and she had a very distinct idea about what journals to publish in. One of the informants had learned, as a postdoctoral researcher, to take a more relaxed attitude towards the constant pressure to publish your research: not to take rejections to heart, to always have other articles in the pipeline, and think of regular publications as demystified and an ordinary part of what you do as an academic.

However, most of the informants did not have very elabo-



rated publication strategies; rather, the interviews indicated that most people had *reactive* publication profiles; you publish when you are invited to special issues or thematic volumes, when you feel that publishing opportunities fit your research profile, or with others when there are external pressures for you to publish your findings (like in the final stages of a research project).

**PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING**, nearly all informants talked above all about international publications in English-language contexts. Publications in Swedish was not really an issue to most, which is quite understandable but also a bit sad.<sup>11</sup> When asked explicitly about it, a few of the informants said that Swedish publications were a part of what they do, but they too felt that publishing in international journals was something that they *needed* to do. Pressure came from all over, for example, in written assessments from external reviewers (when applying for positions) but also in everyday conversations with your senior colleagues, or among friends and peers in social media. Sometimes such messages were indirectly formulated: as a young researcher, your elder colleagues could tell you that your work (in Swedish) “was interesting also to a wider audience” (indicating that you ought to publish in English). One of the informants said that she enjoyed writing in Swedish, but in her field, there were hardly any outlets for publications in Swedish, other than textbooks for university students (and she had already edited one such textbook).

One of the informants, who had a lot of experience of working with Swedish national agencies had made it to his strategy to use selections his research when communicating with agencies and other non-academic actors, for example, when initiating collaborations of different kinds. To him, writing in Swedish was not a secondary activity. He considered cooperation between universities and the non-academic world sadly underutilized, and state agencies an alternative to the conventional research funding bodies. He also emphasized the need for researchers to deal with real-world issues (not just providing answers to *research questions* but contributing to solving *problems*).

### Get with the programme or take it as it comes?

The interviews included a question about the informants’ perceptions of external demands or pressure in other areas (aside from publications); and the perceived room for choosing your own path. Of course, people can have very different ideas about what it means to be a professional researcher (in a specific discipline or field of research), and presumably, they can decide to follow what they perceive to be the norm (“get with the programme”). Alternatively, they can be aware of expectations and demands, and make a deliberative choice *not* to follow

these expectations and rather focus on what they consider to be rewarding. Or, perhaps early-career researcher do not feel that they actually have much choice?

Some of the informants did not feel that much pressure to adapt to any specific “role” as a postdoctoral scholar. Rather, most pressure was probably the kind of pressure, one informant said, that you put on yourself; or, the kind of pressure that came from your family and friends (“social pressure”). Another informant felt quite the opposite; the expectation from academia or senior researchers was that you, as a young researcher, should come up with something new and interesting, to develop and contribute to your specific field.

**ALL INFORMANTS CONSIDERED** the postdoctoral phase as a time for accumulating academic merits, but they had different ideas about what merits mattered the most (aside from international publications). To a few, teaching was considered to be a self-evident part of what you do as an academic. To others, teaching was rather described as a necessary pain. This latter notion is not uncommon. Sometimes it is assumed that, as a recent PhD, you do not *want* to teach; rather, sometimes you *have* to teach, if you are unsuccessful in getting a postdoc position or if you are not lucky enough to be invited by senior scholars to be part of a research project. This assumption goes together with the presumption that all early-career researchers ultimately want to become a professor, or at least, want a life-long career in academia doing research.<sup>12</sup> In one of the interviews, the notion of teaching as a secondary activity was indirectly addressed (“I *even* enjoyed teaching...”, my emphasis).

Another “must” for a young researcher is related to mobility: you are expected to move around between different universities and countries, to do research or perhaps teach there, for a limited time. This is supposedly important for you as a researcher, as it is likely to help you expand your professional networks, which in turn could be related to both more publication opportunities and your general development. This was brought up in a few interviews, as another form of pressure: if you didn’t get the opportunity to work as a guest researcher for some time at some other university, the informants felt that you had “failed” in some way, at least in the eyes of others.

**ONE THE INFORMANTS** noted that the situation in Sweden (and perhaps Europe) is very different from the situation in North America, where career pressure is higher and that (at least in her field) a specific career path is generally expected: if you do not follow that specific path, you are something of a failure. In the Swedish system, she felt more relaxed about finding her own way.

To summarize this section, perceived pressure to conform to an “ideal young scholar” was not exactly present. Rather,



the informants felt that there were different possible ways of accumulating merits. At the same time, most of the early-career researchers that I talked to had a rather distinct idea of what counted as valuable. They could easily identify what would be considered “to be excellent”: publish in top-ranking journals in your field, getting an international postdoc grant from the Swedish Research Council (which includes mobility), develop networks that would include prominent scholars in your field, starting to submit applications for external research funding, and maybe even do to a bit of teaching; as long as it did not interfere too much with your own research. Understanding such “winning strategies” was one thing; but taking part in this academic rat race was not something the informants felt that they necessarily had to do, and to most, not exactly what they wanted to do.

### Who am I?

The final question was about self-image or the subjective researcher identity (if it tended to be discipline-oriented, area studies-oriented, or defined in relation to some other topic). One informant explained that throughout her career (undergraduate studies, graduate studies and postdoctoral employments), she had been oscillating between being perhaps not an *expert* but still being somebody doing research on Eastern Europe and specifically Ukraine, on the one hand, and being a political scientist, on the other hand. Which of these two identities that dominated, depended on the context.<sup>13</sup>

Another informant talked about her identity as a researcher with reference to the topic of her doctoral dissertation; a topic she had returned to more recently. The most common response, however, had to do with (somewhat vague) references to one’s disciplinary belonging. One could very well argue that one’s researcher identity is always defined by one’s specific affiliation, which in turn tend to be institutionally defined. If you are affiliated with (for example) a political science department or unit, your researcher identity would most likely be a “political scientist”. However, among the informants with experience of research projects, the disciplinary identity tended to be something of a second-order identity; rather, the most important identity was more closely related to the specific competence one brought to the table within the project (as somebody with knowledge about a specific country, region, topic or research method).

**IN ONE OF THE INTERVIEWS**, the issue of professional pride was brought up, and in another, the way your disciplinary belonging does not necessarily reflect the way you actually conduct research (which may be different from what is currently the mainstream of the disciplinary core). This demonstrates that any researcher identity always has two sides, one subjective (personal) and one objective (externally given). Often this ascribed identity is referred to as your *social identity*.

Still, it was quite obvious from the interviews that identity

(personal or social) was not the most important issue to the informants, at this moment. The perceived researcher identity mattered to the extent that it helped the informants to decide on whether or not certain calls (for projects or positions) fitted one’s profile. Thus, even if not explicitly stated by the informants, this seems to indicate that it is better to have a “broader” (or more general) professional identity than a more specific one, as it seemingly leaves more doors open (“Can I apply for this or not?”). At the same time, a high degree of specialization may also be a winning strategy for a postdoctoral researcher, of course.

**ONE INFORMANT**, who defended quite recently, said that the researcher identity was an issue that would probably feel more important in the future, for example when speaking about your research to colleagues in different national or international contexts. Right now, the researcher identity was not overly important. This could be related to habituation, and this was manifested especially

in the interviews with the very recent PhDs (who had defended in 2024): they said that they were slowly becoming accustomed to identifying as “researchers”. Among all of those who had defended in 2023 and earlier, this was no longer an issue.

Two informants brought up another aspect of identity, namely the “academic researcher” identity. To one of them, this was related to an ethical approach to science: the privileged position of being in academia comes with responsibility to “speak up” and not shy away from controversial issues.

### Gender issues

Existing studies indicate that PhD students who are members of marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities face especially hard challenges during their career transitions.<sup>14</sup> Also, as we have already noted, there are plenty of studies describing the barriers that early-career women in academia encounter.<sup>15</sup> In the interviews conducted here, gender issues were not part of the analytical framework (Table 1), but such issues were brought up repeatedly, by the interviewer or by the respondents, in different contexts.

To some of the informants, these issues were secondary to issues like securing longer-term contracts (work security) and dealing with external expectations and demands. To others, questions of gender equality were a central part of what they were doing, as researchers and project participants. One of the informants had heard of instances of inequality in the way postdoctoral men and women had been treated (at another department); but as a rule, the informants did not report of bad experiences in this regard.

One of the informants mentioned “academic housekeeping” tasks, when referring to her own postdoctoral workload. This denotes the type of low-status work tasks within university departments that are time-consuming, largely invisible, and that

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nevertheless need to be done. At Swedish universities, research has shown, women tend to carry out a disproportionate share of such academic housekeeping tasks.<sup>16</sup> However, this was mentioned only in passing, not quite seriously. The point was rather that she after her doctoral defense had been quite swamped with work.

## Concluding remarks

There is an extensive literature on socialization of PhD students while the postdoctoral phase has been, until rather recently, much less studied.<sup>17</sup> If we think about doctoral training a socialization process where the aim is to prepare the students for life as professional scholars, then the process (presumably) should come to an end with the defense. In reality, the socialization continues.<sup>18</sup>

And, this process certainly involves the question of identity. In the literature, it has been suggested that the construction of new academic identities (like a postdoctoral identity) always requires a conscious process of deconstructing and reconstructing the pre-existing identity, where one deliberately chooses to merge

or diverge from discipline-specific or institutional norms.<sup>19</sup> Typically, this process of deconstructing and reconstructing takes time and to some, it may be a painful process. To others, it just happens quite naturally. One can also imagine that the establishment of a new identity comes with feelings of relief.

IN THE PRESENT INTERVIEWS, we do not really see the final results of a deliberative deconstructing/reconstructing process. Rather, most of the informants seem to be somewhere in the middle of such as process; some just entering the transformation, others are more close to consolidating an early-career identity. Only two or three of the informants have actually finished the job.

What generally “happens” after the doctoral defense is that the would-be early-career researchers are forced to make a choice, if they have not done so already: should they stay or not stay in academia? Initially, many report about post-dissertation relief; a sense of accomplishment, freedom, in some cases combined with collegial recognition. After that, reality kicks in, and the junior researchers are pressed to look for postdoctoral positions or other temporal opportunities. Collegial support and advice stand out as acutely important; and so does the need for accumulating academic merits in different ways (eg. through publications and various experiences of teaching).<sup>20</sup>

One thing is striking when listening to their stories: as a rule, the junior researchers seem to be poorly prepared when entering the postdoctoral phase. You can, as in the title of this essay, talk about different “professional strategies”. In reality though, it is rather coping strategies that the informants are talking about. They are not resentful or critical, quite the opposite. They want to stay in academia and are appreciative of the opportunity. But most of them were not really prepared for the transition

from PhD student to postdoctoral researcher; and a (self-) critical reflection here is that we, as senior researchers at Södertörn University, need to work harder to prepare our PhD students for the early-career phase. This would be the first finding.

This essay also wanted to investigate how the emphasis on regional studies of the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe mattered for the “navigation” of the early-career period. However, the interviews indicate that the emerging researcher identities are secondary to more pressing issues, relating to survival in academia altogether. The second finding is that a successful identity construction, whether it entails continuity or change, thus takes a little more time. The interviews indicate that identity transformations are still underway in most cases, and the final outcome remains to be seen. ✕

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## appendix

### List of Interviews and disciplines (PhD: 2018–2024).

Archaeology (one).  
 Art history (two).  
 Business studies (two).  
 History (one not affiliated with BEEGS).  
 Media and communication studies (one).  
 Political science (four including one not affiliated with BEEGS).  
 Sociology (one).

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## Post-PhD experiences from Finland

In Finland, PhD researchers follow the same path as their colleagues in Sweden. From the point of view of the Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki, Finland), the situation is the same as at Södertörn University. The most common ways of organising the postdoctoral phase are university funding, a university position (lecturer), funding from a foundation or participation in a project. University funding and positions are scarce, and competition is fierce.

Typically, the postdoctoral phase starts with grant or project. There is no clear strategy for preparing early career researchers. In Helsinki, the official title of the person writing a doctoral thesis is PhD researcher to strengthen the professional element of the doctoral phase. However, to be a full member of the academy, a PhD is required. Post-doctoral publication in peer-reviewed international journals is required to obtain funding or a more permanent position at the university.

In addition, teaching and university pedagogy courses qualify for university positions such as university lecturer or tenure track positions. Being a member of a research community is the most common way to strengthen one’s identity as a researcher. Whether it strengthens area studies focus or disciplinary approach depends on the community. In a research groups and projects at the Aleksanteri Institute, the area studies focus is stronger than in disciplinary university units. The decision to pursue an academic career is usually made at the beginning of the PhD process. If post-doctoral funding is not secured during the first two years, other options may be considered outside academia. ❌



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  20. There are of course many ways of accumulating merits in academia. If you want to be part of the academic rat race, you should from the very beginning try to structure and document your pedagogical competence and merits, teaching skills and teaching qualifications. Such a *teaching portfolio* should demonstrate your pedagogical competence quantitatively and qualitatively, and ideally, include written assessments by senior colleagues. Pedagogical merits could cover, aside from an overview of your actual teaching experience (hours, specific courses), an explanation of your basic pedagogical views, your formal training in university teaching, tutoring experience at both the undergraduate and the advanced level, experience of course development and administration, and if you have anything to report, supervision experience (at the postgraduate level) and textbook production. When constructing your teaching portfolio, make it easy to understand and to summarize for future reviewers: external reviewers typically work under time pressure and need to summarize your competence in just a few paragraphs. If you only include detailed records of all the courses you have been included in, it will be difficult for an external reviewer to summarize your merits, when you apply for positions. See Katarina Winka and Åsa Ryegård, *Teaching Portfolio – Career and Development* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2024). As for your scientific merits: in addition to all articles, monographs, anthologies, conference presentations, book reviews and short pieces that you might have, you should also include any op-eds, blog posts and popular science publications. Also, please note that involvement in research networks, academic journals or conference organisation groups could be relevant. All external grants should be included as well, that aside from projects grants could be small travel grants. Visibility in media should be included as well, alongside collaborative or "outreach" activities. Moreover, when you apply for positions, any administrative merits are certainly worth mentioning: assignments in boards, committees and other bodies at your university, relating to, for example, internationalisation, sustainability issues, gender equality and the working environment at your department or unit. Here, you can also ask colleagues to provide you with written "experience letters". A general recommendation is that you keep a record of *everything* that you do, as a researcher, within and outside academia.

## Professional network is crucial

**T**he post-PhD period is undeniably stressful, marked by both uncertainties and opportunities. Nothing can be taken for granted, and success often depends on seizing the right opportunities. This liminal phase is when newly acquired skills are tested before full entry into the research world. In recent years, various workshops have been introduced to help prepare PhD students for this challenging period, ranging from regular workshops on securing postdoctoral positions to "PhD Career Days," which aim to inspire students to consider life after their defense.

The program has recently expanded to include roundtable discussions with Södertörn University alumni, who share insights into their diverse career paths, both within and outside academia. While these efforts are intended to support PhD students, participation can be difficult for those in the final stages of their thesis, as the pressure to prioritize writing often takes precedence over career preparation.

However, when examining the career trajectories of Baltic and East European studies graduates, over 80% have continued in academia. Remarkably, most have remained within their area of expertise. Interestingly, disciplinary identity was less of a deciding factor than specialized knowledge, which often distinguishes candidates, particularly when junior researchers are invited to join larger research projects. As I frequently emphasize, one crucial factor for success, especially for international students, is the strength of their social network. While writing a PhD may feel like an individual endeavor, building a post-doctoral career requires a well-established professional network developed over time. ✘



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