

WORLDS APART, STRUGGLES ALIKE

Early-career academics in Albania and Sweden

by **Gilda Hoxha** and **Joakim Ekman**

abstract

Early-career academics (ECAs) generally experience insecure employment conditions, intense competition for research funding, and limited access to effective mentorship. Postdoctoral career pathways are marked by uncertainty and precarity, with short-term contracts and high expectations for research output, teaching, and administrative work. Drawing on interviews with ECAs in Sweden and Albania, this essay identifies a striking convergence in their experiences despite substantial differences in national academic systems. The findings suggest that these difficulties are not merely country-specific but reflect broader structural characteristics of contemporary European academia. The persistence of such conditions highlights a systemic disconnect between doctoral training and sustainable academic careers, pointing to the need for reforms that promote long-term career stability and healthier research environments. The essay also reveals differences between Albanian and Swedish ECAs' career aspirations and experiences of gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Early-career academics, academic precarity, comparative higher education, Albania, Sweden.

Life for most individuals who remain in academia after completing their PhD is far from being all sunshine and rainbows. On the contrary, the reality can be quite challenging, according to the literature on early-career academics (ECAs). Many ECAs find themselves working on short-term contracts, which creates persistent uncertainty about their professional future. Securing grants and funding, which are essential for career advancement, is highly competitive and often difficult to achieve without an already established track record. In addition to these fundamental uncertainties, ECAs must balance demanding responsibilities: producing high-quality research, delivering effective teaching, and sometimes managing administrative duties.¹ This juggling act can be overwhelming, with the heavy workload frequently leading to stress and even burnout. Above all, there is intense pressure to publish regularly in international academic journals, which is crucial for establishing academic credibility and securing promotions.² The demands of the job often extend beyond normal working hours, encroaching on personal life and overall wellbeing.

These challenges represent some of the more general struggles faced by junior academics. Yet beyond these, other difficulties are also common. For instance, many ECAs experience a sense of isolation after their PhD, as they often no longer have a formal supervisor to provide guidance and support. Finding mentors or advisors becomes a personal responsibility, which can be a daunting task.³

Furthermore, female junior academics, and ECAs who belong to minority groups, face additional obstacles. These can include implicit biases, unequal access to networking opportunities, and challenges related to work-life balance (particularly for those juggling family responsibilities). Additionally, the lack of role mod-



University of Tirana, Albania.

PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA



Lund University, Sweden.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

els and mentors can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and limit opportunities for career progression.⁴

GIVEN THESE SIGNIFICANT challenges, it is not surprising that many ECAs question the attractiveness of a long-term academic career. In this text, we compare the perspectives and experiences of three ECAs in Albania with those of their counterparts in Sweden. The accounts from Albania were gathered in spring 2025, while the Swedish perspectives were collected a year earlier, in spring 2024.⁵ We posed a similar set of questions to both groups, starting with their overall impressions of life as (post-doctoral) researchers in academia, followed by their access to senior mentors or role models, their experiences with gender inequality, and finally, their outlook on the future: do they see themselves still working in academia ten years from now?

The comparison between these two markedly different European cases (Albania and Sweden) is inspired by a research design known to political scientists as the “most different systems design”. This approach involves selecting cases that differ widely across various background factors (such as culture, economy, and political structures) but share a similar outcome. The goal is to identify the common factor(s) that might explain this shared result.⁶ In this instance, both Albania and Sweden have higher education systems formally aligned international standards; however, they differ significantly in institutional capacity, research infrastructure, and developmental maturity. While Sweden’s research and research training systems meet EU standards, Albania continues to face major challenges in modernization, gender equality, and the development of research

infrastructure, even if we have witnessed notable improvements in recent years.⁷

The next section provides a snapshot overview of the general higher education contexts in Albania and Sweden in order to situate the analysis, before turning to the actual interviews.

Higher education institutions background: Albania and Sweden

Higher education institutions in Albania operate as both public and private entities under the national regulatory framework. The Albanian higher education system has undergone significant transformation over the past decades, marked by substantial reforms and persistent challenges. These changes have been largely driven by the country’s transition from a centralized, state-controlled model to a more autonomous and competitive academic environment. Key reforms have focused on enhancing quality assurance mechanisms, strengthening institutional governance, and aligning curricula and degree structures with European standards through participation in the Bologna Process.⁸

Despite these efforts, the sector continues to face challenges such as limited research funding, ongoing brain drain, and insufficient linkages between universities, the labour market, and international academic networks. These dynamics highlight the ongoing struggle to balance system expansion with quality and societal relevance within Albanian higher education. In particular, a remaining significant challenge is the absence of a clearly defined and sustainable career path for early-stage researchers, which limits professional development opportunities and long-term academic advancement. Combined with constrained research funding and structural barriers, these shortcomings

“THE SECTOR CONTINUES TO FACE CHALLENGES SUCH AS LIMITED RESEARCH FUNDING, ONGOING BRAIN DRAIN, AND INSUFFICIENT LINKAGES BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES, THE LABOUR MARKET, AND INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC NETWORKS.”

continue to hinder the growth and retention of young researchers within Albanian higher education.⁹

In Sweden, higher education institutions consist of universities and university colleges, all operating under the same national legislation. The Swedish higher education system is fully aligned with the Bologna Process, and universities and university colleges enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy in areas such as internal governance, curriculum design, staffing, and research priorities. Quality assurance and compliance with national legislation are overseen by the Swedish Higher Education Authority.¹⁰

ALL THE SAME, ECAs are not seldom described as a particularly vulnerable group in Swedish academia as well. They occupy an uncertain position between having attained formal recognition as independent scholars (i.e., the completion of a PhD), yet lacking the security of a long-term employment. This liminal status creates professional and existential ambiguity. More specifically, Swedish junior researchers face a range of interconnected challenges, including decisions about where and what to publish, whom to seek for mentorship and guidance, and how to balance institutional expectations and performance metrics with personal values, research interests, and long-term career aspirations.¹¹

Thus, despite the differences outlined above, early-career academics (ECAs) in both Albania and Sweden face broadly similar challenges in academic career progression. These challenges, however, differ in their intensity and institutional context. Sweden benefits from more established career frameworks, stronger institutional support, and more robust research funding, whereas ECAs in Albania confront more severe constraints stemming from limited resources and less developed career structures. Turning now to the interview data, the analysis seeks to further illuminate both the shared experiences and the key divergences shaping the career trajectories of early-career academics in Sweden and Albania.

Academic life: A balance of freedom and precarity

Most of the ECAs we interviewed, in both countries, acknowledged the appeal of academic life. After years spent grappling with their doctoral theses, entering the postdoctoral stage brought a sense of accomplishment and intellectual freedom, not seldom accompanied by a degree of collegial recognition. However, the informants could easily point out the less ideal aspects of this path. Chief among them was insecurity. One participant aptly described the experience as “a mix of intellectual fulfilment and systemic frustration”. The frustration referred to precarious employment contracts, the constant pressure to secure external funding through grant applications, and the highly competitive nature of the work, where even temporary

positions are limited. Added to this are the numerous demands related to publishing, teaching, and navigating inflexible bureaucratic systems. Here, the Swedish informants did not differ significantly from the Albanian. Both groups told the same story, very familiar from the literature on ECAs. At the same time, one of the Albanian ECAs noted though that he (temporarily working outside of Albania) faced one additional challenge: being a non-EU citizen. This made the already precarious work situation more complicated, due to visa requirements and residence permit bureaucracy.

Door-openers or gatekeepers?

When discussing mentors and role models, a noticeable difference emerged between the Swedish and Albanian informants. The Swedish ECAs identified a range of individuals who could offer support or guidance: former supervisors, senior scholars, but also (more experienced) peers who could be considered “junior-senior” mentors. These mentors provided various forms of help, from opening career-related doors and facilitating publication opportunities, to offering practical advice and social support. In contrast, the Albanian informants more readily identified mentors as older colleagues or professors who had the

power to offer access to networks, international conferences, and publication opportunities. However, they also noted that such benefits could be withheld if relationships with these mentors were not cultivated properly. Despite these differences, all ECAs recognized the importance of having a more experienced person to turn to for advice and support.

One informant emphasized the need for “a structured mentoring culture”: a system in which access to established scholars is institutionalized rather than

left to chance or individual initiative. She connected this to a perceived gender imbalance, suggesting that men are generally less at risk of missing out on mentorship opportunities. This brings us to the third discussion point, gender inequality.

Experiences of gender inequality

As previously mentioned, existing research has highlighted the barriers faced by early-career women in academia. In the interviews conducted for this confined study, gender differences and inequality emerged as recurring themes across various contexts. However, the experiences reported differed notably between the Swedish and the Albanian ECAs.

While the Swedish informants were clearly aware of gender inequality as a broader issue, none reported experiencing unequal treatment personally. For them, concerns such as securing long-term contracts and managing external demands often took precedence over gender-related issues, which were sometimes perceived as secondary.

In contrast, the Albanian participants shared direct and personal accounts of gender inequality. One informant noted

“EARLY-CAREER ACADEMICS (ECAS) IN BOTH ALBANIA AND SWEDEN FACE BROADLY SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC CAREER PROGRESSION.”

that male colleagues were more frequently invited to co-author papers or join research projects through informal academic networks; opportunities she found less accessible. She also recalled hearing remarks suggesting that women in academia would “slow down” after starting families, whereas men were viewed as stable, long-term assets. Such perceptions, she believed, influenced decisions about hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities. Another Albanian informant commented that female researchers were expected to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves.

Here, the informants confirm a situation that is well-known. Gender equality has been a topic of institutional discussion in Albania for many years, yet it continues to face significant obstacles in terms of implementation and broader cultural acceptance. Albania remains a predominantly patriarchal society, a characteristic that is also reflected within its universities, where informal norms, organisational cultures, and inherited hierarchies often reproduce gendered expectations. In the last few years, higher education institutions have started to introduce Gender Equality Plans, initiatives encouraged largely by the EU integration process and external project requirements rather than emerging from an internally driven strategic commitment.

TO BE NOTED, although most higher education institutions formally adhere to gender equality frameworks, in practice, their implementation remains limited. For many universities in Albania, the gender equality plan exists primarily on paper and is not consistently integrated into recruitment, promotion, or decision-making process. Institutional inertia, lack of accountability mechanisms, and insufficient resources often prevent these plans from translating into tangible outcomes. As a result, gender disparities persist across academic ranks, particularly in leadership positions and research funding distribution.

Although the small sample size here prevents definitive conclusions about national academic cultures, it is reasonable to suggest that research environments with limited funding and fewer institutionalized practices may be more susceptible to informality and nepotism. In contrast, more professionalized and transparent systems may offer greater safeguards against such biases.¹²

Prospects for the future

What about the future? Can our informants, the ECAs in Sweden and Albania, imagine themselves remaining in academia ten years from now?

The Swedish respondents generally answered yes to this question. While they acknowledged the uncertainties inherent in academic careers (see above), they still saw staying in academia as both desirable and realistically achievable. Among the Albanian researchers, the picture was slightly more complex. All expressed a desire to remain in academia, but one highlighted the need for significant structural reforms. If the system continues to function as it currently does, she explained, alternative career paths, such as roles in think tanks, international organizations, or NGOs, could become more appealing. Leaving

academia, in her view, would not signify failure but rather an adaptation to systemic limitations. Another Albanian informant put it more bluntly: “The moment I see it does not work for me, I’m out with no regrets”.

Concluding remarks

As noted in the introduction, our tentative comparison between Albania and Sweden was guided (or perhaps rather, inspired) by a most different systems design. Despite substantial national differences, a striking convergence emerges: ECAs in both countries report remarkably similar challenges. Precarious employment conditions, intense competition for external funding, and a pronounced need for mentorship recur across both cases. This suggests that such challenges are not merely context-specific, but rather pervasive features of contemporary academic life. More broadly, there appears to be a structural gap in career opportunities and trajectories between PhD candidates and established researchers across European universities.

Naturally, differences exist between the two countries examined here, particularly regarding experiences of unequal treatment and expectations for the future. Nevertheless, the overarching pattern is consistent: the academic systems in both Sweden and Albania present substantial barriers to early-career researchers, irrespective of national context. This leads to a sobering conclusion. If two markedly different systems generate such similar accounts of struggle, the problem is unlikely to be purely local; instead, it points to a structural and widespread issue. Meaningful reform is therefore required; not only to provide early-career researchers with viable academic career paths, but also to strengthen the functionality of research environments in Sweden, Albania, and beyond. ✖

Gilda Hoxha is a Lecturer at Universiteti Mesdhetar i Shqipërisë, Albania.

Joakim Ekman is Professor in Political Science and the Director of CBEES at Södertörn University.

references

- 1 Cathy A. Trower, Ann E. Austin and Mary Deane Sorcinelli, "Paradise Lost: How the Academy Converts Enthusiastic Recruits into Early-Career Doubters", *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, vol. 53, no. 9, 2001, 3–6; Shuhua Chen, Lynn McAlphine and Cheryl Amundsen, "Postdoctoral Positions as Preparation for Desired Careers: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Postdoctoral Experience", *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2015, 1083–1096; Cathelijm J. F. Waaijer et al., "Temporary Contracts: Effect on Job Satisfaction and Personal Lives of Recent PhD Graduates", *Higher Education*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2017, 321–339; Channah Herschberg, Yvonne Benschop and van Marieke van den Brink, "Precarious Postdocs: A Comparative Study on Recruitment and Selection of Early-Career Researchers", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2018, 303–310; Carine Signoret et al., "Well-Being of Early-Career Researchers: Insights from a Swedish Survey", *Higher Education Policy*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2019, 273–296; Kate I. McCormick and Libba Willcox, "Mind the Gap: Transitions from Doctoral Graduates to Early Career Faculty", *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, vol. 14, 2020, 543–566; Fulvio Castellacci and Clara Viñas-Bardolet, "Permanent Contracts and Job Satisfaction in Academia: Evidence from European countries", *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 46, no. 9, 2021, 1866–1880.
- 2 Mark De Rond and Allan Miller, "Publish or Perish: Bane or Boon of Academic Life?", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2005, 321–329; Seema Rawat and Sanjay Meena, "Publish or Perish: Where are We Heading?", *Journal of Research in Medical Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, 87–89.
- 3 Barbara Bagilhole and Jackie Goode, "The Contradiction of the Myth of Individual Merit, and the Reality of a Patriarchal Support System in Academic Careers: A Feminist Investigation", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 2, 2001, 161–180; Agnes Bäker, Julia Muschallik and Kerstin Pull, "Successful Mentors in Academia: Are they Teachers, Sponsors and/or Collaborators?", *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2020, 723–735.
- 4 Peter van der Besselaar and Ulf Sandström, "Vicious Circles of Gender Bias, Lower Positions, and Lower Performance: Gender Differences in Scholarly Productivity and Impact", *Plos One*, 2017; Stina Powell, "Gender Equality in Academia: Intentions and Consequences", *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations* 2018/1; Åsa Berggren, Cecilia Almlöv, Alexandra D'Urso and Ann Grubbström, "'Screwed from the Start': How Women Perceive Opportunities and Barriers for Building a Successful Research Career", *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 7, 2022; Jacob D. Davidson et al., "Postdoctoral Researchers' Perspectives on Working Conditions and Equal Opportunities in German Academia", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2023; Daniel Pizzolato et al., "Bridging the Gap – How to Walk the Talk on Supporting Early Career Researchers", *Open Research Europe*, 2023, <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/3-75>; cf. Sarah Winslow and Shannon N. Davis, "Gender Inequality Across the Academic Life Course", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2016, 404–416; Fredrik Bondestam and Maja Lundquist, "Sexual Harassment in Higher Education – A Systematic Review", *European Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 10, 2020, 397–419; Douina Bourbain, "Everyday Sexism and Racism in the Ivory Tower: The Experiences of Early Career Researchers on the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in the Academic Workplace", *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2021, 248–267.
- 5 The junior researchers in Albania comprised three individuals, two women and one man. The Swedish junior researchers are described in Joakim Ekman, "Navigators in the Baltic Sea Region: Professional Strategies and Identity Constructions Among Early-Career Academics", *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2024, 121–130.
- 6 Carsten Ackar, "On the Applicability of the Most Similar Systems Design in Comparative Research", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*", vol. 11, no. 5, 2008, 389–401.
- 7 Ministry of Education and Sports, Albania, "Dokumenti i politikave të arsimit të lartë 2030: Për arsimin e lartë në harmoni me standardet ndërkombëtare, mbështetës i procesit të integritimit dhe zhvillimit të vendit [Higher education policy document 2030] (Government of Albania, 2025). <https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Dokumenti-i-Politikave-te-Arsimit-te-Larte-18022025.pdf>
- 8 European Commission, *European Higher Education Area: Bologna Process Implementation* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020); *Qendra e Botimeve Zyrtare (QBZ)*, July 22, 2015. <https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2015/07/22/80>; Elona Saraci, *Albanian Higher Education in Perpetual Reform* (Tirana: Albanian Erasmus+ Office, 2017). https://erasmusplus.oead.at/fileadmin/Dokumente/.../Albania_presentation_in_Vienna__Austria.pdf
- 9 Erisa Kryeziu, *The Uncertain Journey of Albanian Students Towards a Good Job. Citizens*. (October 1, 2024). <https://citizens.al/en/2024/10/01/rrugetimi-i-pasigurt-i-studenteve-shqiptare-drejt-nje-pune-te-mire/>; cf. WBC-RRI-NET, "Empowering Albanian Young Academics for Research and Innovation", 2022; Eriona Deda, "Scientific Research, Development and Innovation: a Priority for Socio-Economic Growth of a Contry", *Scientific Journal of Professional Studies*, vol. 6, 2025.
- 10 Swedish Council for Higher Education, "The Swedish Higher Education System" (Swedish Council for Higher Education website, 2024). <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/enic-naric-sveden/the-swedish-higher-education-system/>
- 11 Jonatan Nästesjö, *Uncertainty, Worth, Identity: How Early Career Academics Navigate Evaluative Landscapes* (Lund: Department of Educational Sciences, 2024).
- 12 Ivalio Izvorski, Sergiy Kasyanenko, Michael M. Lokshin and Iván Torre, *Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, Fall 2024: Better Education for Stronger Growth* (Washington: World Bank, 2024).