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The day-to-day experiences of early-career academics in the periphery

Abstract

This paper examines the everyday experiences of early career academics (ECAs) in a peripheral higher education system. It focuses on the roles, actions, routines, time pressures and relationships that characterise the everyday work of ECAs, while attending to the dynamics of interplay between structure and agency. Using a qualitative methodology, the daily experiences of ECAs are presented on a past-present-future continuum in order to enable to track the changes that have occurred over time and at different career stages. The findings draw attention to the range of pressures that ECAs in peripheral system face in building a teaching and research profile. The paper calls for a deeper understanding of ECAs' experiences with teaching and the impact of structural constraints on their research roles, particularly in peripheral systems where teaching occupies a more dominant role compared to research.

Keywords

early-career academics; periphery; structure and agency; North Macedonia

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Die alltäglichen Erfahrungen von Nachwuchswissenschaftlern in der Peripherie

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden die Alltagserfahrungen von Nachwuchswissenschaftlern in einem peripheren Hochschulsystem untersucht. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf die Rollen, Handlungen, Routinen, den Zeitdruck und die Beziehungen, die den Arbeitsalltag von Nachwuchswissenschaftlern kennzeichnen, und berücksichtigt dabei die Dynamik des Zusammenspiels von Struktur und Handeln. Mithilfe einer qualitativen Methodik werden die täglichen Erfahrungen von Rechnungshofmitarbeiter:innen auf einem Kontinuum aus Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft dargestellt, um die Veränderungen im Laufe der Zeit und in den verschiedenen Karrierestufen nachvollziehen zu können. Die Ergebnisse lenken die Aufmerksamkeit auf das Spektrum der Anforderungen, mit denen sich ECAs in peripheren Systemen beim Aufbau eines Lehr- und Forschungsprofils konfrontiert sehen. Das Papier ruft zu einem tieferen Verständnis der Erfahrungen von ECAs mit der Lehre und den Auswirkungen struktureller Beschränkungen auf ihre Forschungsrolle auf, insbesondere in peripheren Systemen, in denen die Lehre im Vergleich zur Forschung eine dominantere Rolle einnimmt.

Schlüsselwörter

Nachwuchswissenschaftler; Peripherie; Struktur und Handeln; Nordmazedonien

1   Introduction

The academic profession is often portrayed as a core element of higher education without which no university can ensure long-term sustainability and quality (Finkelstein et al., 1998; Altbach, 2015; Galaz-Fontes et al., 2016). The success of higher education systems and institutions is, therefore, seen as critically dependent upon the knowledge, ability and commitment of their academic staff (Locke et al., 2011; Kehm and Teichler, 2013). Moreover, due to its outreach as a profession educating and providing training for other professions, the academic profession is often viewed as one of the key professions in modern society (Kogan and Teichler, 2007).

Despite its significance, a frequently mentioned postulate is a growing sense of crisis and a decreasing attractiveness of the academic profession globally with many academics, particularly at the early career stage, re-examining their career choices and some of them ultimately leaving academic employment (Welch, 2005; Enders & Musselin, 2008; Kehm & Teichler, 2013). Although much of the available higher education literature suggests that ECAs are particularly exposed to the changing circumstances taking place, and consequently caught in a bind on the margins of the profession, they have been a largely ignored segment of analysis, as many authors point out (e.g. L. Archer, 2008b; McAlpine, 2012; Yudkevich et al., 2015). It is only in recent years that the career paths of ECAs have become a subject of attention, with a small but growing number of studies denoting the journey of ECAs into the academy and their process of identity-formation (see McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). The large majority of these studies, however, are elaborated and conceptually approached in the context of the more affluent countries of Western Europe and North America, and in many cases research-intensive universities – and thus fit the context of mainstream and more advanced higher education systems. In contrast, the experience of ECAs in a number of developing, peripheral and less mature higher education systems – where teaching has a more dominant role – remain on the margins of contemporary higher education studies.

Another weakness of contemporary higher education literature is the limited description of practices, activities and events that are part of the daily commitments of academics. As Jazvac-Martek et al. (2011, p. 17) note, "there exists little inquiry into the variations in daily events and routines", and very few studies focus on the actual successes and challenges that academics face in their daily work.

Against this background, this paper responds to a call for a more meaningful representation of the everyday life of ECAs, while exploring the distinct events that define the experiences of ECAs in the context of a peripheral higher education system like North Macedonia. Based on a fine-grained description of the roles, actions, routines, time pressures and relationships that characterise the everyday work of ECAs in North Macedonia, this paper analyses how ECAs construct, negotiate and experience time on the everyday basis. The daily experiences of ECAs report in this chapter are presented on a past-present-future continuum in order to track the changes that have occurred over time and at different stages.

2   Conceptual framing

From a conceptual standpoint, in looking at the day-to-day experiences of ECAs, this paper attends to the dynamics of interplay between structure and agency. As has been acknowledged in several studies (e.g. Kahn et al., 2012; Campbell & O'Meara, 2014; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018) it is only by balancing structure and agency that one can provide a reasoned framing to conceptualize and conduct research about ECAs, and academics more generally. In this respect, this paper responds to a call for a more nuanced representation of the experiences of academics, moving away from seeing the individual (i.e. the agent) being separated from his/her context (i.e. the structure), and towards studying both structure and agency as elements that influence one another.

3   Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges faced by ECAs in North Macedonia's higher education system. Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of ECAs in different institutional and disciplinary contexts.

The choice of research method aims to contrast studies of academics careers that stem from survey-based research that tends to reduce and simplify academics' choicemaking and experiences to what is immediately observable and quantifiable. A qualitative lens was chosen to also allow

> "for a more realist view of the relationship between agency and structure, [where] individual agency and intention need to be investigated while not disregarding the structures that can support and constrain such agency" (McAlpine et al., 2014, p. 954).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 32 ECAs from social sciences and STEM disciplines across four universities (two public and two private) in North Macedonia. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. *Professional experience*: ECAs were defined as those with no more than eight years of experience in higher education. The proposed length of experience as a criterion in this study aligns with other studies on ECAs (e.g. Austin et al., 2007, [7 years]; Laudel and Glaser, 2008, [8 years]) and follows Bazeley's (2003, p. 259) recommendation that "those for whom undertaking a PhD marked the start of their academic career, could often be considered to be early career for more than five years". This experience-based criterion was preferred over age-based definitions (e.g., under 40 years old) to account for the varied life stages and career pathways of ECAs, some of whom may have already established families or non-academic careers before entering academia.

2. *Disciplinary diversity*: Participants were drawn from both social sciences (e.g., sociology, political science) and STEM fields (e.g., engineering, computer science) to identify discipline-specific challenges.

3. *Institutional representation*: The sample included ECAs from both public and private universities to account for potential differences in institutional support and working conditions.

Universities were selected to ensure geographical diversity, covering major academic centers in North Macedonia; and variation in institutional profiles, including larger, well-established public universities and smaller, newer private institutions.

The interview protocol was conceptually framed around two key themes. One cluster of questions aimed to make apparent the ways in which ECAs were being agentive. The agency perspective was captured, for instance, by asking questions that addressed the extent to which individuals: believed they could influence certain events and achieve desired goals; were intentional in making choices; were strategic in setting and working towards goals; and showed their preparedness and motivation to take action within a range of contexts. A second cluster of questions was aimed at understanding the perceived influence of structures on the experiences of ECAs. Questions were intended to capture the ways in which individuals felt structures created opportunities and/or challenges.

All 32 interviews were transcribed verbatim and then added to a qualitative software package. The process of analysis was guided by a systematic code book which displayed the key codes used and their definition. Some extracts were double and triple coded as they related to several coding categories. During this process, the definitions of the coding categories were frequently revisited to ensure that they were consistent and relevant to the text coded. Although this study has initially benefited from conceptual insights, such as those of related to the interplay of structure and agency, the analysis was mainly data driven. This opened up the data to a wider, organic, and multi-dimensional perspective of interpretation.

4 Framing North Macedonia's higher education: A peripheral system in transition

This paper frames the Macedonian higher education system as a periphery, situated within the larger context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with which it shares several key commonalities distinguishing it from non-perip heral systems (i.e., those in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and other affluent regions). Building on existing scholarship (Zgaga et al., 2013a; Branković et al., 2014), the paper contends that higher education in CEE retains a significant degree of idiosyncrasy and faces unique structural challenges compared to Western systems—so much so that the region has been described as "*a distinctive area on the global higher education map*" (Liviu, 2015, p. 40) and a "*natural laboratory*" for studying theoretical and policy-related dilemmas in academia (Stensaker et al., 2014, p. 9). Kwiek (2007, p. 107) takes this argument further, asserting an "*irreconcilable divide*" between the academic realities of well-funded Western democracies and the chronically under-resourced post-communist systems of CEE. In this view, CEE higher education institutions not only grapple with challenges similar to those in Western Europe but also contend with compounded socioeconomic and political legacies that have persisted for decades. As such, they warrant independent scholarly attention (File & Goedegebuure, 2003; Kwiek, 2007; Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2015).

4.1 Historical developments and challenges

The Macedonian higher education system is relatively young. Until the late 1990s, it comprised only two public universities. However, with the turn of the millennium, the sector underwent significant expansion. Initially, relaxed legal criteria and low entry barriers led to a rapid surge in private higher education providers within just a few years – a trend observed in other peripheral systems within the CEE region. Following this first wave of private sector growth in the early 2000s, a second wave emerged later in the decade—this time in the public sector, with four new public

universities established in quick succession. Yet, much like the earlier private expansion, the rise of public institutions has not been without challenges. Critics have raised concerns over whether increasing the number of institutions truly enhances educational quality (Petrusevski & Najcevska, 2011). A related issue is the potential shift in focus from qualitative improvement to mere quantitative growth, which some argue could undermine the system's long-term sustainability (Stevanovikj et al., 2019). Intensifying these challenges is the country's ongoing demographic decline over the past two decades, which has intensified pressures on higher education institutions by shrinking the pool of prospective students and raising questions about the sustainability of such rapid institutional expansion.

Teaching is the central focus of higher education institutions in North Macedonia, mirroring trends in many other Central and Eastern European (CEE) systems—particularly those of former Yugoslav countries. Given the emphasis on teaching, academic salaries are primarily determined by teaching hours, with many faculty members having teaching as their sole responsibility. This stands in stark contrast to non-peripheral systems, where academics are expected to maintain a balance between teaching and research. Up to 85 % of state funding in North Macedonia is allocated to covering institutional operating costs and academic salaries (UNESCO, 2023), leaving minimal resources for capital investments or infrastructure improvements.

Compounding this issue is a misalignment between promotion criteria and actual working conditions. While career advancement depends on research productivity—requiring publications in international journals—research contributions are not factored into salary calculations. Moreover, research funding remains critically low, at just 0.2 % of GDP (far below the EU average). This severe underfunding has been identified as a key driver of brain drain (Dolenec et al., 2014, p. 79), further weakening the country's academic ecosystem. The international profile of Macedonian academia is rather weak. Communication with the wider scholarly community is usually limited to countries from the Ex-Yugoslav region. Notably, the number of foreign academics working in the system is marginal.

In the international arena, despite the tendency of viewing the Bologna Process as a model to follow, North Macedonia has limited opportunities to influence and shape this initiative. As a general rule, Bologna initiatives are 'downloaded' and incorporated into the domestic policy arena, rather than vice versa. According to Zgaga et al. (2013b, p. 366) the dynamic of copy-pasting existing European policies from the "center" to the "periphery" has led to the creation of "policy colonies" in the CEE region, a trend which he finds particularly harmful for countries striving for a "return to Europe".

While efforts to come closer to Western European standards have showed limited success, the system is by no means immune to global trends. The diversification of higher education providers, polotical pressures and the increasing financial difficulties faced by universities are elements that one can see in other systems as well. At the same time, contrary to developments elsewhere, it seems that neoliberal ideologies – such as audit cultures of accountability and new public management logics – have not penetrated deeply into the structures of Macedonian higher education. From a global perspective, this might be seen as a positive (non-)development in light of the frequent criticisms against the destructive impact of the so called "neoliberal attack2 (Levin et al., 2020) on the lives of academics; however, as the remaining sections of this paper show, a complete absence of such mechanisms may well be equally detrimental.

5 Findings

5.1 The past: early autonomy, dependence and networking

On becoming a teacher: "I was left alone to teach"

In terms of teaching, ECAs are left to figure things out on their own from the very start of their careers. Even though many participants joined academia rather early, during or not long after the completion of their Master's studies, they were mostly

expected to perform teaching work independently and without being supervised. As a result, many did not see their early years as a training ground, because they felt that they were already operating autonomously in the sense that they were given a lot of space in choosing, designing and applying the pedagogical practices that they considered appropriate.

For some ECAs, the independence in early teaching and the high degree of freedom in determining their own courses of action brought pleasure, helped them to be more relaxed, enhanced their creativity, and was seen as a rewarding experience. This wide space for agency and autonomy served as an early recognition of their ability and was perceived as a validation of a successful start to their career. For others, however, this same freedom and autonomy was far from ideal. It created discomfort and intensified worries and stress:

> "The planning of lessons was extremely time consuming since I had to do it on my own. I was using the weekends to read the materials that students had to read. On Sundays I would also prepare my presentation for my Monday classes. After teaching all day, usually five or six hours, I would come home and start immediately doing the same thing for the presentation on Tuesday. Then the same thing for Wednesday and Thursday. Friday was my day off and my time to sleep. Most Fridays I couldn't even get out of bed as I was so exhausted. Going out and spending time with friends was out of the question".

The fact that ECAs had a *carte blanche* and almost unlimited discretionary power to act on their own, intensified their feelings of insecurity and sense of isolation:

> "When you are a novice teacher you don't really know what is working well and what isn't. It takes much more time than you would expect to get it right. Yet you are left alone in the classroom with an expectation that you already know how it should be done".

What being 'left alone' meant was that the mistakes made in the classroom were often interpreted as a personal failure and seen as one's own fault, rather than as being influenced by external causes and factors, such as lack of mentorship and inadequate socialisation. This parallels many of the experiences shared by ECAs

around failure in other academic contexts, where they tend to assign blame to themselves for what may be in fact structural issues (Sutherland and Taylor, 2011; McAlpine et al., 2012). Moreover, being 'left alone' had implications for ECAs' perception about their own ability, which in several situations led to more existential questions: whether or not one is really competent enough to do the job, and should one consider leaving academia?

Learning to teach from experience and observation

As most ECAs were teaching independently from the very beginning, the principal source of learning was through a great deal of 'self-learning' and 'practical experimentation' – or what several interviewees characterised as learning 'on the job' and learning from 'trial and error'. In that respect, when it comes to getting socialised into teaching, a relatively regular feature of academic life in Macedonian universities is to be self-directed.

What was striking is that none of the participants, regardless of their institutional affiliation, spoke of any kind of institutional training being available to support their teaching. Surprisingly, several ECAs shared a view that such training, even if available, would not change much as university teaching is something that develops mainly through experience, rather than through training. While learning on the job is inevitable in almost all professions, including the academic, this view seems to underestimate the pedagogical basis and scientific aspects of teaching. In a way, there was a tendency to perceive teaching as something intrinsic and almost genetic regarding which, as one participant said, "you either have it or you don't".

At the same time what was obvious is that since institutional oversight over ECAs' teaching was non-existent and structured support was not available, many ECAs had to find alternative ways to identify where the gaps in their teaching corpus are and how these gaps can be addressed. In an effort to compensate for the lack of structured support, several ECAs talked about informally inviting more experienced colleagues to observe their lessons, to discuss their performance and to provide suggestions for

improvement. Others tried to learn how to teach by observing senior professors around them in the day-to-day work environment.

What was clear is that as ECAs learned how to teach, they engaged in a process of interpretation, through which some of the teaching practices they observed, or which were handed down to them informally, were critically assessed and modified. At the same time, when analyzing the ways participants narrated their ways of learning, it was evident that they were faced with the challenge of creating an authentic teaching identity for themselves. Working on this project of learning in isolation, they often felt that they were in a situation where they had 'to create something out of nothing', and found this process emotionally draining and frustrating.

Navigating through difficulties as a novice teacher

Participants found the initial stage of working as a teacher extremely difficult and intense. Having no or very little institutional support and supervision necessitated ECAs to become quick and active learners, and to take initiative. Yet, the expressed agency of individuals was also very fragile, as participants intensely experienced shocks to which they had to quickly adapt. During the interviews, participants regularly talked about how their early days of teaching were filled with feelings of confusion, self-doubt and lack of confidence in what they were doing.

A particularly noticeable challenge for novice teachers was that they were required to teach multiple, and often very different, subject matters. A related challenge is the constant switching that comes with teaching very different courses. As one participant noted, "switching between six courses that differ quite markedly is not easy to resolve", and she felt that it is extremely time consuming since it meant "six different subject syllabi to be looked at, six different sets of lectures to be prepared, six different reading lists to be made". Moreover, what added to this participant's frustration was the feeling that she received "leftovers that older professors don't want to teach". Like many others, she perceived that "juniors" at the bottom of the hierarchy are required to teach a wide repertoire of courses ("If there are course floating around that tends to be put upon the 'juniors' with less seniority"), and far more courses than

what is determined by law. This issue was noticeable quite consistently and regardless of the university, discipline or rank of participants.

Several participants also spoke about the abrupt shift in identity from being a student to becoming a teacher and how this can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. As one participant explained, his quick crossover from being a Master's student to a teacher helped him relate to students better, but sometimes made him question his sense of competence and whether he was being 'taken seriously' as a young teacher:

> "In some ways it was positive because I was a student on the same program just a year before. So, basically, I kind of knew what students like, how they behave among each other and what I should do to establish a good relationship with them. But at the same time, it was really difficult to establish authority in the classroom. I felt that I wasn't taken seriously at times because I was just a year older than my students. Just a year earlier I was on the other side of the bench listening to the lectures that I was now teaching. It felt a bit surreal and it took some time to get adjusted to standing in front of a classroom".

Becoming a researcher: "I started doing research, but never felt like a researcher"

The analysis of the data revealed clearly that the development of ECAs' research identity started emerging much later compared to that of being a teacher. Important factors in this context were the institutional forces that had a constraining effect on the early construction of a researchers' identity. As observed by many, the most worrisome aspect at the start is that research is not perceived by institutions to be of equal importance as teaching or held to be of importance in its own right. This leaves ECAs with no sufficient time to undertake research and makes any attempt to focus on 'becoming a researcher' very challenging, if not impossible in the early days.

The role of a researcher began to take shape typically after two or three years, when most ECAs started writing their doctoral thesis. The number of participants who re-

ported working on their PhD right from the start of their academic career was extremely small, and even those who reported an early start were unable to make significant progress due to commitments around teaching and administration.

However, the process of *perceiving oneself as a* researcher was not necessarily connected with the experience of *engaging* in research. As one particiapnt made it clear:

> "I started doing research, but never felt like a researcher. I had no access to materials and research papers, there wasn't anybody to talk to about my research, there weren't any conferences or discussions that I could take part in … you know, the things that actually make you feel like a researcher".

What makes this account significant here is that ECAs may not draw their identity of 'becoming' or 'being' a researcher on simply conducting research alone. The environmental factors that the account touched upon show that this identity was about more than just writing and conducting research. This raises important broader issues about the means of becoming a researcher, and how the literature dedicated to early career researchers/academics should conceive their identity construction, and the criteria that should be taken into account when doing so.

Participants also reflected on their initiation with research and how the teaching-focused organisational culture restricted them in this process. Almost all of the interviewees felt some tension between their teaching and research duties, with many reporting having virtually no research time at all during the first few semesters. Those who managed to preserve some time for research felt that this came with a cost to their "*modus vivendi*" (Archer 2003, p. 169). The problem, as one participant emphasised, is that "one needs to cut down private time with family and friends in order to achieve this".

As with teaching, participants commonly shared that there had been no adequate introduction to the fundamentals of research and how it should be undertaken. Hence, in this area again, most participants were used to being self-reliant, and tended to think of research as engaging in 'solitary deliberation'. Interestingly, however, unlike with teaching where there was more dispute as to whether one should

be guided or left free, when research is concerned, the method involving a great deal of direction was preferred by most interviewed ECAs.

Making use of networks to overcome the lack of mentorship and the closeness of the institutional scholarly environment

For those participants experiencing a lack of mentorship, the simplest, and usually the most common strategy, was turning necessity into a virtue and accepting the fact they need to become more independent. They pointed out that infrequent supervision helped them to become more assertive, to seek advice elsewhere, or to be better organized. In this respect, it was clear that structural challenges around supervision often prompted their practice of agency, rather than reducing it.

An important way of overcoming the absence of mentorship was to draw upon personal and other academic relationships. Typically, ECAs were trying to network beyond their institutions and beyond the North Macedonian higher education system; they did this in a more or less fluid and spontaneous way, but nonetheless epistemically essential for their development as academics. Seeking and finding advice and resources 'from the outside' was considered both inspiring and intellectually liberating. At the same time, for financial and structural reasons, the international profile of many ECAs in North Macedonia is rather weak, and communication with the wider scholarly community was usually limited to other countries from the formerYugoslav region.

5.2   The present: time pressures and challenges of managing the different roles

There seems to be at least a practical distinction between three areas of activity performed by all ECAs, namely: teaching, research and administration. ambiguous and oftentimes conflictual relationship, with little connecting tissue between them. In resonance with other studies on the experiences of ECAs, participants appeared to be working very long hours – on average, 56 hours per week, with few participants

reporting 70 or even 80 hours as the norm, which is about twice as high than the officially prescribed 40 hours per week.

"Most of what I do is teach"

Teaching (including all aspects of teaching such as preparation, time in class and grading) was the main activity reported by ECAs, on average taking 60 % of their time. Even though research (including all aspects of the research process) is the most rewarded activity within the promotion process, ECAs spend a much smaller portion of their time on it compared to teaching, which is highly favoured institutionally and dominates institutional structures.

This is not too surprising when we consider that daily work pressures are largely directed at the delivery of courses. In fact, not a single participant reported spending more time on research than teaching, even if the former was a preferred activity of the individual – suggesting that there are structural features built into the system that can restrict the enactment of ECAs' desired choices.

Interestingly, while ECAs were institutionally funnelled into a teaching role, within this role they were provided with high degree of power over their teaching. This depicts a somewhat contradictory situation, and exposes a complex structure-agency interplay, where one can be both dominated by the structures in place and, at the same time, empowered by the space of agency provided within those structures.

In discussing the great deal of time that ECAs spend on teaching, several remarked that being an academic has become "too secondary-school-like" – resembling the responsibilities of a high school teacher, rather than a lecturer at a university:

> „I feel more like a high school teacher than a university lecturer. Most of what I do is teach … Working in a university is too secondary-school-like. I really don't see much difference between what I do and what high school teachers do".

The intensive period of teaching, often led to ECAs teaching on 'autopilot'. Some described this 'autopilot' mode as a form of emotional disengagement to cope with

the workload pressures. The reasons for such disengagement were varied, but among the top reasons cited by participants were burnout and overwork, lack of institutional support and recognition, and the quality of student-teacher interaction. The disengagement of ECAs was often manifested in such a way that they consciously refused to go above and beyond the perceived minimum expectations of their role set by institutions:

> "I mostly do my teaching on autopilot these days, without putting in any thinking … I use it as a mechanism to protect myself from burnout. It conserves my mental energy … I see no point in doing more than the bare minimum when nobody from management is going to come and thank me for what I've done … This is my way of protesting".

The invisibility of research work and the act of balancing

As teaching is the central academic activity of universities, the obvious consequence is that time for research and writing is impacted in negative ways. Despite the promotion system being directed at research productivity, the research role is inadequately built into the institutional framework of duties. The root of this problem was identified by participants as being historical.

The fact that conducting research is not considered a formal (i.e., contractual) obligation meant that it was difficult to find time for it; but because it is research that holds the key to career advancement, time for it had to be found. On average, ECAs reported spending 25 % of their time on research, in what some participants described as the 'invisible' hours. Managing this 'invisible' research work in an institutional culture of teaching often necessitated working on weekends, public holidays, vacation periods, and long into the night. In this respect, research was typically relegated to private time and outside of official working hours.

Delays and barriers to PhD completion

The idea that a doctoral dissertation can be completed within the limits of five years – the time that PhD candidates are given to complete the PhD – seemed impossible

under present conditions where one needs to juggle between writing, teaching and doing administrative work. When discussing the reasons causing delays in finishing, participants mostly highlighted the impossibility of keeping up with the desired PhD writing schedule in the context of competing pressures from teaching and administration. In that respect, the most significant barrier for timely completion was that participants were not only PhD students, but also full-time employees holding academic posts. Prioritising the PhD seemed very difficult in such circumstances.

The quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship had a significant influence on how participants regarded their PhD experience, and whether they were able to finish in time. This echos existing research on non-peripheral higher education systems, which consistently shows the importance of the quality of the student-supervisor interaction. Many studies point out that appropriate mentorship can positively influence the student's satisfaction and progress, and reduce intentions of quitting (O'Meara, 2015; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). At the same time, non-existent, limited, or poor academic support is related to dissatisfaction, longer completion times and dropout, but also to lower productivity and mental health problems such as worrying, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress (ibid.).

Administrative work: "feeling like Sisyphus"

Administrative work consumed a significant portion of participants' working time, from 20 % and up to 40 %. In some cases, the administrative workload took roughly the same share of time as teaching, and often more time than research. In fact, a surprisingly high number of participants (more than one third) reported spending more time on administration than on research. Experiencing heavy administration loads had obvious implications for the scholarly aspects of ECAs' work, and typically, it meant that research time had to be sacrificed. The feeling that administrative work is an endless and perpetual rock-pushing up a hill was common among participants.

Duties such as writing grant proposals and fund raising – which are relatively commonly reported by ECAs in non-peripheral systems (Fenby-Hulse et al., 2019) – did

not emerge from the data. Apparently, a focus on revenue generation has still not come to pervade the daily operations of academics in North Macedonia. This can be explained by the fact that research work is still relatively underdeveloped, so therefore ECAs as well as other academic staff are not expected to raise research money. This is in contrast to the experiences of ECAs in other contexts, where their success is often measured in terms of their ability to garner financial support for their university (Besselaar & Sandström, 2015).

"No such thing as a typical week"?

In addition to discussing their involvement in teaching, research and administration, participants were asked to discuss if a 'typical week' existed. Some participants were able to describe a more standardised and cyclic day-to-day schedule, while others believed that each week was different. To provide a sense of both, I present two differing accounts of the work week:

> "Most weeks are fairly typical. I teach five courses every week, from Monday to Wednesday, three-four hours each day. On these days my focus is solely on teaching and preparation for classes. I start the day by planning lessons and refreshing my memory of the things that I will teach that day. After lunch I usually start teaching. I don't do anything else on these days as I feel like 'a squeezed lemon' when I finish teaching … I use Thursdays to take care of admin work, marking essays, meeting students, helping my mentor and everything else that is pending. If I'm not too tired I try to do some research as well, but I usually use Fridays for research".

> "I would say there's no such thing as a typical week. There are always different things going on and no two days are the same. You simply never know when and how long you will need to work … My teaching schedule is quite irregular. One week I can be teaching 25 hours, and the next one I can teach only 10 hours. One week I can be teaching every day and the next only once or twice a week. One week I can teach in the morning and the other one in the afternoon … There is usually a lot of administrative work that needs sorting

and which comes rather unexpectedly and is difficult to plan ahead … What is typical is that I always have too much work and I'm never done before 7 p.m. That's what I would say is typical".

The majority of participants clearly preferred to have a work routine and a fairly fixed schedule. That is, "a stable *modus vivendi* … that they themselves deemed worthwhile, workable and with which they felt they could live" (Archer, 2003, p. 191). They viewed reoccurrence positively, as it allowed anticipation and assured some sort of stability, as well as allowing more focus on higher-level thinking. A strong routine also helped individuals to successfully overcome stressful periods.

However, some ECAs complained that the immense workload and the unpredictability of the workload prevented them from getting into a set routine. A particularly challenging issue was that some ECAs often had to rotate the courses that they teach each semester, so there was no stability or growth in teaching expertise. As a result of this unpredictability, it often seemed almost impossible for them to make plans that they could stick to in terms of work and personal time. In this respect, having a typical week was principally referred to as an ideal, and not something really occurring in everyday practice. This is consistent with many non-peripheral studies of ECAs where daily and weekly schedules are often described as broken, disrupted and fragmented (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018).

5.3   The future: uncertainty, hope and breaking the mould

For most participants, talking about the day-to-day future and what it may bring was a rather challenging task and it was something they usually did not have any time for. The long work hours and the feeling of constantly "running between tasks" (Nenad) were shrinking their perspectives on future possibilities and have led to an extensive focus on the present. This uncertainty, in many cases, was a key factor that restricted ECAs' ability to engage in such conversations and to forecast how their everyday lives might look like in the future. In her research on academic staff in

Finland, Ylijoki (2010, p. 375) calls this orientation "instant living", whereby academics "concentrate entirely on what is here and now". We can see an example of this 'instant living' in the following quote:

> "I find it hard to think long-term at all: about what my research plans are for the next five years, let alone about what my career will look like for the next ten years, hell, even what the next year will look like. I mean when can I even find time for that?".

Those ECAs who recently started their career had higher hopes that things will improve over time. However, this optimistic perception of the future poses certain risks. As Brew et al. (2017) demonstrate, academics who have unfulfilled expectations of what life in academia is or could be are more likely to disengage over time. Similarly, McAlpine and Turner (2012), exploring the 'imagined futures' of PhD students, show that many of them hold idealistic expectations about the nature of academic work, which again negatively influences their future success and motivation.

6   Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper was to understand the variety and complexity that characterizes the everyday experiences of ECAs by providing a close study of the roles and activities they undertake, as well as the relationships they were able to build and maintain. It also addressed how ECAs create, influence and manage their day-to-day working schedules in relation to their personal preferences and institutional, national and other pressures.

The findings reveal a system where structural constraints—such as teaching-dominated workloads, minimal research funding, and misaligned promotion criteria—profoundly shape ECAs' daily experiences, while their agency emerges as a fragile yet resilient force navigating these limitations. ECAs' agency emerges in their strategies to compensate for structural gaps: self-directed learning, informal peer networks, and international collaboration. However, these efforts are constrained by

limited resources and weak institutional support, highlighting the precarious balance between individual resilience and systemic neglect.

The findings point to a number of differences to non-peripheral systems in Europe and elsewhere. While in non-peripheral systems the early career phase is a period when ECAs are gradually trained to become independent, in the Macedonian context a high proportion of participants were independent already in the first week of their work, and for this reason, not surprisingly, they did not see themselves as occupying a training position.

Moreover, ECAs drew upon different kinds of relationships in their day-to-day lives, beyond what is typically considered in the literature on ECAs as being the key contact point – the supervisor (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011). In the absence of institutional support networks and with the 'absent supervisor', various sources of support such as family, friends, and partners were instrumental in helping participants navigate the day-to-day experiences.

International networking and interactions with colleagues from abroad offered a different kind of assistance. They helped ECAs to stretch their professional horizons and to excel academically. This highlights that looking at the relationship between ECAs and their mentors alone ignores the different types of support channels that ECAs use to help themselves undertake their daily work.

In terms of teaching, research and administration, a narrative of constant juggling was clearly present. Growing daily work pressures and long work hours led ECAs into a constant battle over time – a issue we see in non-peripheries as well. Evidently, the burden of teaching and administration limited the time available for research and made it 'invisible' through the operation of institutional pressures and structures directed towards teaching. Captured by daily pressures in the present, made it difficult to think about the future. At the same time, it is also remarkable that none of the ECAs interviewed reported being exposed to external time control or being obliged to keep a strict record of their time and what they have been doing – an administrative pressure that many ECAs in the West (and other places) currently face (Felt, 2009). On one hand, this lack of oversight was seen as desirable by participants given that

it helped them preserve some autonomy and flexibility in managing their time. On the other hand, the fact that they were not subjected to any kind of external pressure to report on how they spent their time allowed for much of their work to go unseen and unrecognised. What made it even more 'invisible' was that a lot of it was not built into ECAs' work contracts and was expected to be done on a voluntary basis.

Interestingly, a focus on revenue generation has still not come to pervade the daily operations of young academics in North Macedonia. This can be explained by the fact that research work is still relatively underdeveloped, so therefore ECAs as well as other academic staff are not expected to raise research money. This is in contrast to the experiences of ECAs in other contexts, where their success is often measured in terms of their ability to garner financial support for their university (Besselaar & Sandström, 2015) and to predict and measure the impact of their research (Fenby-Hulse et al. 2019). Similarly, the institutional expectation that researchers should demonstrate the potential impact of their work was not very present in the narratives of participants. This is in stark contrast to experiences of ECAs in the non-periphery where they are frequently asked to provide evidence for the impact of their research on the wider society outside academia (Sutherland et al., 2013; McAlpine & Amundsen 2018).

For policymakers, addressing brain drain and improving academic retention necessitates investing in research ecosystems and aligning promotion criteria with realistic workloads. For scholars, this study calls for comparative research across peripheral systems to identify shared challenges and adaptive strategies. Finally, elevating ECAs' voices in policy debates can ensure reforms reflect their lived realities, fostering a more equitable academic future.

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