

Should I Stay or Should I Go? The Legal and Institutional Contexts of Early Academic Careers

What makes young academics thrive in their careers—or abandon academia altogether? This project seeks to uncover the hidden forces that shape the career paths of early-career researchers, focusing on how laws, institutional structures, and public policies impact their professional lives. By studying young scholars in Poland and comparing their experiences to those working in Nordic countries, we aim to understand why some remain in academia, others move abroad, and many leave the field entirely.

At the heart of this research lies a simple but crucial question: How do the environments in which young academics work affect their choices, challenges, and coping strategies? For example, Poland has seen a sharp increase in doctoral students in recent decades, but many struggle to find stable academic positions. Meanwhile, Nordic countries offer a stark contrast, with more stable jobs, supportive public policies, and high levels of internationalization. By examining these two systems, we hope to uncover practical solutions for improving the academic landscape.

The project is firmly rooted in real-life experiences. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews, we'll hear directly from young academics about their struggles and successes. We'll ask: What challenges do they face? How do they navigate the pressures of publishing, teaching, and unstable contracts? And most importantly, what drives their decisions to stay in academia, pursue private-sector careers, or relocate abroad?

Why does this matter? Young academics are not just the future of universities—they are also the backbone of innovation and knowledge economies. Their success or failure affects not only academic institutions but also broader societal progress. Understanding their experiences is key to creating fairer, more sustainable working environments that encourage talented individuals to stay in the field.

This project is expected to generate insights that will help shape better policies for higher education. By analyzing the legal and institutional barriers faced by young scholars, we aim to provide recommendations for improving job stability, gender equality, and overall career satisfaction. In the long run, our findings could contribute to making academia a place where talent flourishes, rather than falters.