LEARNING THE TRICKS OF THE ACADEMIC TRADE: EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAREER-BUILDING AND FOR EVALUATION

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SUMMARY. Recently there has been a growing scholarly interest in young researchers' challenges and struggles in academia, as well as in mentoring and career support and development issues. Based on 56 semi-structured interviews conducted with young scholars in the social sciences and humanities in 14 European countries, this paper provides recommendations for early career investigator support. The set of recommendations includes advice for early career investigators themselves, for supervisors, for decision makers at higher education institutions and research institutes, for policy makers and funders, and for peer reviewers. The major themes and trends identified across the interviews show that both individuals and institutions can play a major role in junior researchers' career-building and development.

KEYWORDS: early career investigators, social sciences and humanities, evaluation, recommendations, mentoring, support.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the past several decades there has been a flourishing interest in early career investigators' (ECI) academic experiences ranging from research on academic development aspects (Laudel & Gläser 2008, Remmik et al. 2011, Matthews et al. 2014), publishing and authorship patterns (Nicholas et al. 2015, Nicholas et al. 2017a), scholarly communication aspects (Nicholas et al. 2017b, Rodríguez-Bravo et al. 2017) to analyses of predictors and constructions of success (Archer 2008, Stupnisky et al. 2015, Sutherland 2017), and issues of stress and mechanisms of support (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles 2008). It is especially the areas of support and mentoring of young scholars that have attracted considerable attention, as changes and pressures in the higher education domain have made it necessary for academics to possess a wider range of various skills (Brown 2006). In addition, a tendency for a performative approach in evaluation is observed, "where what is able to be measured and counted (numbers of research outputs and citations; h-Index rankings; and student evaluation scores, for example) have become the predominant indicators for success" (Sutherland 2017: 743). In that context young scholars need

considerable guidance, knowledge and support in order to meet the demands of academia and pursue their career tracks successfully.

Various recommendations and other aspects for early career support can be found in manuals of a general nature (see Sorcinelli 2000 or Wilson-Ahlstrom et al. 2017) or they can be directed towards specific, more vulnerable groups of young scholars, such as young females or researchers of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (Montgomery et al. 2014, Oberhauser & Caretta 2019). Research on mentoring aspects also focuses on individual disciplines (see Hardwick 2005, Foote & Solem 2009 for Geography, for example, or Good et al. 2013 for Psychology) or on entire science fields (Nicholas et al. 2017a, 2017b). Many of the empirical studies are based on semi-structured interviews or case studies which, however, usually deal with a small number of respondents or a single national context.

The recommendations we present here are based on 56 semi-structured interviews conducted with ECIs (PhD+ 8 years) from 14 countries around Europe (Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia). The interviews were conducted by the members of the ECI group at the ENRESSH (European Network for Research Evaluation in Social Sciences and Humanities) COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action, the duration of which was 2016–2020. All interviewees came from a social sciences and humanities background and represented a diverse range of disciplinary fields: Geography, History, Psychology, Economics, Communication, Sociology, Physical Education, Law, Political Sciences, Educology, Philosophy, Business, Gender Studies, Hungarian Studies, Social & Health Policy, Agroeconomics, Literature, Linguistics, Ethnology, Management, Civil Engineering, Folklore Studies. Four interviews were conducted in each country during 2017–2018 in the respective national languages and afterwards translated into English. 27 interviewees were male ECIs, 29 interviewees were female young scholars.

The transcribed and translated interviews were analyzed employing qualitative content analysis. The themes which emerged from the analysis were used to develop a set of recommendations for early career investigator support, directed at five target groups: (1) early career researchers themselves; (2) supervisors; (3) decision makers at higher education institutions / research institutes; (4) policy makers or funders; (5) peer reviewers. The sections below present the main recommendations stemming from the data, supported by the quotations from the interviews (the coding used shows the metadata of the interview: the number of the interview, the country and the gender of the interviewee, as well as the discipline the interviewee represents). Though our primary interest was in the issues related to the aspects of evaluation and young scholars in SSH, the interviews revealed various other

opportunities and threats faced by early career researchers, some of which are of a more general character than evaluation. We have included some of these as well. Even though we define ECIs as the ones who are already PhD holders and could be up to eight years beyond their PhD (according to the definition used by COST), some of the questions in the interview centered around the PhD experiences of the interviewees. This is also reflected in the recommendations below.

Many of the recommendations we provide in this paper apply to ECIs in any discipline, not only of the SSH but also of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Nevertheless, evaluation and career-building in the SSH are impacted by some epistemological specificities of the SSH disciplines, within which different paradigms are in concurrence rather than follow one another as in STEM (Kuhn, 2012 [1962]). Furthermore the generation of knowledge in SSH is often more deeply interwoven with the local context. Even within a single discipline, there are epistemological and linguistic specificities that contribute to the diversity of approaches and insights (Ochsner et al. 2020: 100).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EARLY CAREER INVESTIGATORS THEMSELVES

- Make use of – and maintain – all possible relevant networks both locally and internationally as this can provide useful information on employment opportunities, project work, publishing channels as well as other types of practical knowledge and useful information in career-building.

  I am coordinating a volunteer activity, and the volunteers are all people from the [university]. We are engaged in relationships through which I began to learn and to meet people. But also, from a political point of view, because we meet a lot of people <…> it opened me many things which made it possible for me to get this post-doc at that time. (8 Belgium M, Social Psychology).

  I succeeded in publishing the article when I started looking for people through my social networks, who could advise me where the article could get accepted. (22 Lithuania F, Sociology)

- Use every opportunity to work together with senior like-minded colleagues or more experienced peers on publications or other academic projects in order to gain knowledge and learn scientific, managerial, and relational good practices of your discipline.

  Co-authorship offers you an additional review. A colleague who is writing with you will also read your section and will give you some suggestion or idea. And you can get an idea by reading the text of your colleague. Four eyes see more than two eyes. (18 Croatia M, History)

  The best part of my career was probably when I was working on the project involving some of the most renowned social scientists currently living and working in Slovakia at the so-called

centre of excellence. It was inspirational and motivating and enabled me to learn from experienced researchers. It also helped me to understand how academia works. (49 Slovakia F, Management)

- Use every opportunity to become a member of any relevant committee (editorial committee, grant committee, etc.) Learning by doing matters in academia!

  I think it's actually very positive and fruitful if you do peer-reviewing, and work with reviewers as co-editor, and have your own articles peer-reviewed because it gives you a broader view of the whole process, and you understand much better each other's roles when you do this. (43 Portugal M, Linguistics)

  After having ended up acting as an evaluator also by myself, I have started to understand how the system works and the good and bad sides of it. (15 Finland M, History)

- Observe other colleagues' career paths and publication choices. Learning by observing is important in academia!

  I have colleagues whom I will not mention who never publish as single authors. It gave me a lot of inspiration. First, because it is enriching. In addition, because strategically, it allows you to publish more. This is what I do, I never publish alone, or almost not anymore. Because it has enrichments. (6 Belgium F, Communication)

  I keep an eye on the achievements of my colleagues and on the market and that kind of thing and I am quite explicit about this. (34 Malta M, Social Psychology)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPERVISORS

- Understand that in many cases your role in the early career investigator's life is a very important one, that it can influence his/her views and loyalty to the discipline, the science field and general skills in the profession.

  My relationship with my PhD supervisors was excellent. I am truly happy I had them – they taught me how to think independently and how to think overall. (26 Latvia F, Psycholinguistics)

  Since a young person, who starts his/her academic career does not have a clear vision of all aspects of a scientific career, I think that the role of an academic advisor/ senior researcher and his/her advice, support, career planning and guidance are crucial for young researcher career development. (17 Croatia F, Psychology)

- Provide guidance on professional – including relevant administrative - matters as well as academic development: publication strategies, employment opportunities, competitive grant funding, academic and non-academic career perspectives for early career PhD holders in your field.

It was very useful because my supervisor was very experienced. She knew what it means to write a thesis, to produce a scholarly text and undoubtedly I received a lot of feedback that eventually helped me to shape my thesis. (23 Lithuania M, Literature & Linguistics)

When it comes to career advancement for a researcher, it comes with age and is associated with the know-how and wisdom that you can't gain from reading books. You learn things from your mentor. (37 Poland F, Educology)

- Give not only intellectual support, but also moral support, a positive attitude, and encouragement.

My academic advisor was excellent in organisation, support and cooperation with me. If there is not a suitable academic advisor then there will be a problem with the completion of the PhD. There are obstacles and it is a long process until the completion of the PhD. A continuous support is necessary from the academic advisor. Because I received this kind of advice I strived to support my students in the same way. (9 Cyprus F, Educology)

My advice to current PhD students is to choose a supervisor who sees your hidden treasures – your talents and knows how to make them put into the practice. (27 Latvia F, Management)

- Invite early career investigators to cooperate in organizing conferences, working in projects, other professional and academic activities so that it is easier for them to acquire professional knowledge and gain experience in these fields.

He [the supervisor] would share his contacts with me, so that was helpful. (40 Poland M, Political Sciences)

I thought my relationship with the mentor would be much more intense. I thought that we would work and write some articles or attend some conference events together or at least he would send me somewhere. I thought that educational training would take place in a way that is usually manifested abroad. There, students have a mentor with whom they evaluate what you did on weekly or monthly basis, and what you will do in this regard in the future. In this way, you acquire knowledge. Here, everything was left to me. (55 Slovenia M, Geography)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS / RESEARCH INSTITUTES

- Provide subscriptions to databases relevant for the discipline, professional literature and other resources.

Some journals to which local universities are subscribed are of quite a questionable quality and often there is no subscription to top journals – this means I do not even have a theoretical chance of formulating a proper question. (26 Latvia F, Psycholinguistics)

There is no pool of money for proofreading. I mean I was lucky to once get the money from the faculty, but there is less and less money and less and less people receive it. When you want to prepare a good article and publish it abroad you can pay out of your own pocket, which is

not a fortune. But you have to take into account that if you prepare 3-4 good texts a year in English, they have to be proofread by a native speaker. So those are little things that add up, making you feel as if the organization was not fully helping you by creating ideal working conditions. (39 Poland M, Communication)

- Provide training on publishing know-how: specific training on how to publish an article in a reputable journal, training on scientific publications, evaluation and peer review, training in academic English and scholarly article writing.

  I ask colleagues, where they publish, how to know and how to select the publication channel. Nobody has ever tried to explain that to me. I don't know whether somebody has to explain that or whether we have to figure it out ourselves. And how do I find out? Maybe if I find some information on my own it could be wrong. (21 Lithuania F, Literature)

  Sadly, the doctoral training is very weak at our university. There is lack of courses and training at institutional and faculty level, only some training I received at my department, however most of it only while studying, doing research, teaching etc. It was basically learning by doing approach. (50 Slovakia F, Political Sciences)

- Provide project management and administrative help in preparing applications for grants as well as timely and updated information on the relevant possibilities and calls for funding.

  When my team applied for an Erasmus+ grant we were positively surprised because the project management department at our university assigned a lady who works in administration to help us. I have to say she did a great job coping with a majority of the organizational and legislative matters. (40 Poland M, Political Sciences)

  I think what we could do to considerably improve it, is to increase the visibility of these calls for projects. There were some initiatives here. I tried to make use of them. There are websites where they collect the current project proposals for our region, our field of expertise, but I haven't had much success with them, they were not updated well enough. The institutions responsible and the project promoters did not update these websites very often, so sometimes you could only find the project after a lengthy search. (48 Serbia M, Agroeconomics)

- Ensure transparency about how quantitative indicators are used to assess research in the institution.

  I mean, the Ministry gives clear guidelines and clearly evaluates various publication manners, whereas the institutions – because of certain weakness of its leaders or the lack of leaders in such institutions as well as wanting to by-pass evaluation procedures – make the procedures foggy and some people get lost in it. (38 Poland F, Philosophy)

  Frankly speaking, what influenced my career was a lack of systematic evaluation that would be based on the clear and transparent rules. The evaluation should be designed in the way that helps researchers grow professionally. In our contexts it is often only administrative procedure to comply with the everchanging framework set up by the ministry. (49 Slovakia F, Management)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS OR FUNDERS

- Provide special grants and separate evaluation tracks for early career investigators.

  Now there are talks about a new strategic fund where there should be a separate track for early career investigators, so that they could compete with each other, and not with senior researchers. I think this is a very good practice for early career investigators, in the University and in the Research Council of Lithuania, because otherwise the senior scholars totally push them aside, because it can't even be compared when a person is 20 years in science and when a person is 2 years in science. (22 Lithuania F, Sociology)

  I think that evaluation in academia in my country is quite rigorous and elitist. New criteria for career development lack the sensitivity for current social situation in which young researchers are. (17 Croatia M, Psychology)

- Change the evaluation scheme by including value on non-academic work experience where relevant, as well as societal impact.

  I remember a discussion in which, as a trade union member, we had proposed to include the services to society in the evaluation. They replied to us with "services to the university". They did not hear us. (7 Belgium M, Sociology)

  Everything I have done so far in that field [science popularisation] was because the faculty would ask me very much to do it, some journalists would be very persistent, would call and ask for comments <…>. And also there were requirements in some projects, for example, postdoctoral research, to do science popularisation, so I did it. But only within the limits of what was required. (24 Lithuania M, Political Sciences)

- Give constructive feedback from various types of grant evaluation reports. It is important to provide feedback also to those who did not receive the grant.

  The evaluators must give sufficient feedback to the rejected projects. For instance I was rejected from one project that I received a positive feedback with a score of 4 out of 5. Nevertheless the project has been rejected by the evaluators. They had accepted a project with a score of 4.5 out of 5. Therefore I am not sure how did I miss the 0.5 point. On the other hand if the evaluators send you a complete report of the evaluation you would know the weak areas of the proposal. (11 Cyprus M, Political Sciences)

  These are not clear cases and you receive feedback so seldom – it happens way too seldom <…>. Academy of Finland and Marie Curie – they are exceptions – you get feedback from them and it gives a chance to develop your application for the next round. (16 Finland F, Sociology)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEER REVIEWERS

- Be aware that article peer reviews and feedback are deemed by early career investigators as important sources of professional information, therefore try to provide extensive and detailed reviews.

Most of the reviews I received were positive. And the suggestions they wrote were pretty much valuable. I also think that young scientists at the beginning of their career can be directed on the right path by those suggestions. It helped me a lot. (18 Croatia M, History)

My experiences [with peer review of articles] are mostly positive. Sometimes some reviews are more technically oriented. Most of all, I am pleased with those reviews, in which you see that the reviewer really went into details and, for example, proposed additional literature that should be checked. I have a positive experience with the review process. (54 Slovenia F, Civil Engineering)

- Provide sound comments and reviews, but always in a constructive way.

I would like to recommend the reviewers to focus not only on the things which have to be improved but also on a positive contribution and pluses of the publication. Encouragement and support are of a high value. It is also recommendable for a reviewer to try to give negative criticism in a constructive way – not making an early career researcher feel like a loser. (27 Latvia F, Management)

I see it for example in my first article, that the way it was commented was very instructive and forward-looking, and it was very much the way you'd want young researchers to be treated, to understand on what basis young researchers write these things. (13 Finland F, Educology)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The set of recommendations for early career investigator support derived from 56 semi-structured interviews with young scholars in SSH across Europe shows that junior faculty are faced with a number of opportunities and threats at the outset of their academic careers. It is worth noticing that experiences varied a lot among interviewees. The lack of the elements that some interviewees experienced as opportunities was named as a threat by others. For example, a supportive, inspiring, and informed supervisor could be a real opportunity or something that is missing and threatening a young scholar's career path. Some interviewees would recall positive and encouraging peer review comments to their first article, whereas others would complain about superficial, negative, or even hostile remarks by peer reviewers.

It is nevertheless clear that there are many avenues for early career scholars to learn the ropes and meet the (very frequently) challenging demands of an academic profession. It is very important that supervisors and colleagues share their experiences, best practices, and information to provide much needed guidance to young scholars. Possibilities to get involved in various academic and research activities at the initial career stages can serve as a powerful trigger in the professional development trajectory of the ECIs. However, this is not easy to achieve at the early career stage, so young scholars depend on the "brokerage" of their supervisors and senior

colleagues. Meeting the demands of the profession could be very challenging, especially trying to balance work commitments and personal life, research and teaching or administrative duties; therefore, young scholars also need a lot of encouragement and sometimes simply moral support from their mentors. It is important to understand that mentoring practices pass from one generation to another generation, and good experiences, as noted in one interviewee's comment above, are then transferred to future generations of young researchers in replicable patterns of scholarly support. As scholars, we all need role models at the outset of our careers.

Young scholars themselves also have to be very active in establishing networks both locally and internationally in order to advance in their careers and have many more opportunities for cooperation, learning, and receiving feedback. As noted by a number of the interviewees, regardless of their national, institutional or disciplinary context, the contacts which they established were of great value in many respects – getting feedback, searching for job openings, writing or publishing a paper, forming a research project team, or filling out complex applications for funding. Observing and learning by experience likewise served as a great strategy to progress in the academia.

Not surprisingly institutions also play a major role in the career development. With the help of specialized and general training, administrative and project management support, and timely information exchange, institutions can create a natural context for the increase of knowledge and the advancement of the career of young researchers. Such vital resources as funding for participation in conferences, available professional literature, and the possibility to gain various skills can empower ECIs with reliable knowledge and networking opportunities, which in its turn could raise their ability to build an academic career. Clear and transparent evaluation criteria in employment and promotion applied by institutions instill trust, confidence, and job satisfaction in ECIs. Policy makers and funders could also play an important role in early career support. Young scholars note an increased challenge to compete in research funding programs when there are no separate tracks for early career researchers, when no feedback is provided for the rejected proposals or when evaluation procedures are not transparent. Research evaluation policies could also shape entire trends for the future generation of young scholars by awarding greater significance to science popularization or societal benefits which scholars have to seek for in their research. Other community members such as peer reviewers could also play an important role in building skills and shaping up ECIs as fledgling members of the academic community. Extensive, substantial, professional, and fair reviews of the papers written by the beginning scholars could help them significantly improve their contributions and learn important lessons of the craft.

To conclude, robust institutional and individual support in terms of knowledge exchange, skill development, and funding opportunities could help significantly the career advancement of young researchers, whereas optimism, encouragement, and constructive criticism at all levels could make them motivated, strong, and self-confident scholars as well as capable, inspiring mentors of the growing generation of young researchers.

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KAIP TAMPAMA SĖKMINGU TYRĖJU? ĮRODYMAIS GRĮSTOS REKOMENDACIJOS KARJERAI PLĖTOTI IR MOKSLO PASIEKIMAMS VERTINTI

SANTRAUKA. Pastaruoju metu mokslinėje literatūroje vis daugiau dėmesio skiriama jaunųjų mokslininkų karjeros formavimo aspektams, mentorystės ir paramos karjeros pradžioje svarbai. Šio straipsnio tikslas – remiantis 56 pusiau struktūruotais pokalbiais su jaunaisiais humanitarinių ir socialinių mokslų tyrėjais iš 14 Europos šalių pateikti rekomendacijas jaunųjų mokslininkų paramai. Rekomendacijos skirtos patiems jauniesiems mokslininkams, jų moksliniams vadovams ir mentoriams, sprendimus priimantiems asmenims aukštojo mokslo institucijose ir mokslo institutuose, mokslo politikos formuotojams ir mokslinių tekstų recenzentams. Pagrindinės tendencijos, atsiskleidusios pokalbiuose, patvirtina, kad ir individualūs asmenys, ir institucijos atlieka labai svarbų vaidmenį formuojant ir plėtojant jaunųjų tyrėjų karjerą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: jaunieji mokslininkai, humanitariniai ir socialiniai mokslai, mokslo vertinimas, rekomendacijos, mentorystė, parama.