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# Survey Report: Embedded Discrimination and Career Tips for junior researchers.

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## Introduction

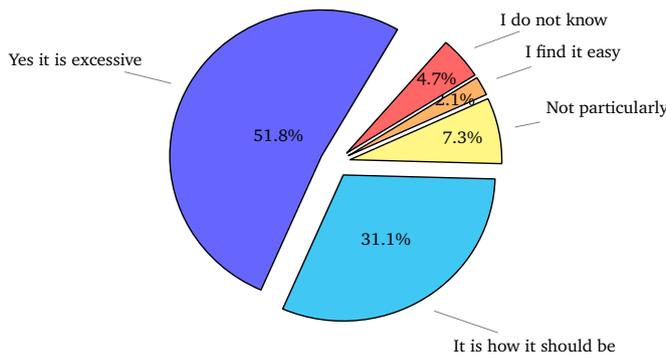
Evidence from European countries shows that, for younger and non-tenured academics, it is increasingly difficult to get a permanent job in academia in their own country, and they must therefore consider migrating to another country, or to leave academia altogether getting a job in another sector (Castellacci and Viñas-Bardolet, 2020). The average age at which permanent positions are granted is constantly increasing, elongating the time gap between the PhD and permanent employment. The unstable situation deteriorates the life quality and mental health of junior researchers to the universities economic benefit, more and more reluctant to hire permanent staff (Woolston, 2019; Woolston, 2020). In Norway, permanent positions in academia are also becoming less available, with an increase of PhDs candidates (Tønnessen and Fimland, 2019). Even though statistics show a problematically high proportion of precarious contracts in the university sector, the numbers are uncertain, as there are no standards to how these positions are registered (Husebekk et al., 2016). Norwegian assessments show how a temporary position influences the workers and their family economy, as well as possibilities of getting a mortgage (Regjeringen, 2020; Underdal et al., 2018). They also have to spend extensive time applying for a permanent position. The current amount of temporary employees in the Norwegian university sector is 16 % (Tønnessen and Fimland, 2020). Considering the international relevance of the problem, we want to shed light on the Norwegian situation, with emphasis on young researchers with a PhD interested in pursuing an academic career. We have asked junior researchers that are or have been engaged in a career within Norwegian academia to share their career ex-

perience and perspectives. Despite our comprehensive questionnaire, we collected 193 responses coming from various fields and with different levels of seniority, with a survey combining both closed-ended and open-ended questions. A baseline hypothesis in academic policy is that, by increasing the competition to reach a certain position, the best candidates will be selected. We here examine the consequence of this selective path on the competitors and how the selection criteria is perceived by participants in our study.

## Sample description

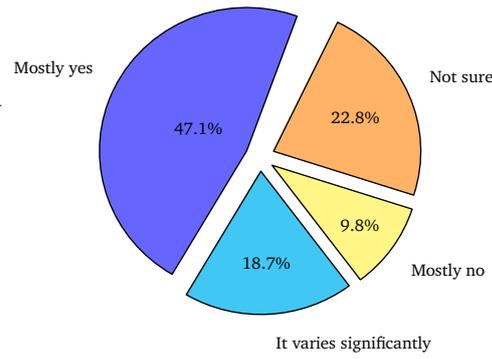
As careers within the university sector appear to vary across different institutions, departments, and even for each individual, we believe that a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures can provide valuable guidance for current and future young researchers with academic ambitions.

We contacted a very sparse group of junior researchers working in Norway; postdocs, researchers (forsker) and recently hired professors. It shall be noted that, due to privacy limits, we could not reach a significant amount of people that recently left academia. Our results, therefore, shall be considered as a rather conservative estimate of the issues described. They were asked to share their experience via a questionnaire/interview. The data was collected on “Nettskjema”, a digital platform owned by the University of Oslo from May through September 2020. Respondents were recruited via email and social media through various young researcher organizations (e.g. SiN, DION, UiOdoc, UiAdoc, Todos, ProtestPub and New University Norway), as well as over direct contact with the head of departments at the major universi-



		N. answers	Percent
Valid	Yes, it is excessive	100	51.8
	It is how it should be	60	31.1
	Not particularly	14	7.3
	I find it easy	4	2.1
	I do not know	9	4.7
	Total	187	96.9
Missing		6	3.1
Total		193	100.0

**Figure 1:** Survey result on the question: "Do you find applying for academic position demanding?". Multiple choices question, single answer.



		N. answers	Percent
Valid	Mostly yes	91	47.1
	It varies significantly	36	18.7
	Mostly no	19	9.8
	Not sure	44	22.8
	Total	190	98.4
Missing		3	1.6
Total		193	100.0

**Figure 2:** Survey result on the question: "Are internal candidates somehow advantaged?". Multiple choices question, single answer.

ties and colleges in Norway. Our sample is composed of 193 subjects/informants coming from a variety of academic fields: 2,6% come from formal sciences (e.g., computer science, logic, mathematics and statistics), 19,7 % from humanities, 35,2 % from natural sciences, 12,4 % from professions and applied sciences, 28,0 % from social sciences and 2,1 % percent from other fields.

In the sample, 38,3 % state that they have a permanent position, while 46,4 % said no, and 15,3 % have a permanent but with a defined end date. This last position type is by law considered permanent in Norway, but is also in practice one of the categories that has researchers who live under the instability and distress of not being able to plan their career and/or private life in a long term perspective. 94,8 % are currently working when answering the questionnaire, and 5,2 % are not.

## Results and Discussion

We asked several questions to assess the junior researchers' perception on different aspects of careers within academia in Norway. We now focus on two concerns exposed in our questionnaire: demanding applications and internal candidates advantage. The combination of both events promotes an academic environment, where junior researchers experience a constant struggle, due to the existence of priority channels, which further increase the barriers for obtaining permanent positions assigned within a transparent and unbiased selection procedure. Our survey responses uncover an academic atmosphere of instability and un-

fairness, perceived among the precarious researchers in Norway.

In the following sections we report data gathered on the respondents perception regarding the application procedure and its difficulties. A forthcoming selection reports quotes highlighting and describing the respective perspectives. All the answers collected in the final section, where we asked: "Do you have some tips to share with a young researcher interested in a career in academia? What to do, and what not to do?" and "Is there anything we have not asked you about that might be relevant to know?"; are reported in the attached document ('Career within academia, Tips and Suggestions from researchers to junior researchers'). Free-text comments have been sorted thematically for reading purpose, and, when necessary, sensitive data and private information was removed.

### Demanding applications

A majority of our respondents answered that they find applying for positions demanding, as Figure 1 shows. More than 50 % answered that it is excessive, 7,3 % answered not particularly, 2,1 % find it easy, while 31,1 % believe it is how it should be.

### Internal Candidate bias

While it is not a surprise that a competitive process is perceived as demanding, reflections on why internal candidates are considered advantaged are commendable. In our survey, as shown in Figure 2, a striking 49.7 % indicated that internal candidates are mostly advantaged and 18.9% reported that it varies significantly,

partially confirming that on at least one occasion, the internal candidate has been advantaged. Only 10% indicated that internal candidates are mostly not advantaged. We here include a few explanatory quotes to capture junior researcher perception of requirements and career possibilities in academia.

### **Direct quotes**

While we reserve ourselves to further detail our findings in forthcoming publications, we include here some of the most significant quotes collected from an open question in our survey. We have asked the respondents if they would like to contribute with additional recommendations, based on their experience and point of view, that could be beneficial to junior researchers.

#### **Quote 1**

Work hard, continue to build your CV: Publish, attend conferences, take part in public debate, win awards, teach, organize outreach, volunteer, write grant applications. Have clear answers to questions like: "What unique skills and expertise do you bring to the community? How do students learn, and how has this insight shaped your teaching strategies?" Realizing skill and experience is not enough: You also need luck and good timing. Not having children, and working 24/7 might give you an advantage - if you don't do this sacrifice one of your competitors may.

#### **Quote 2**

Be patient. Never give up, if you think Academia is really for you. Get used to experiencing more setbacks than positive news (We regret to inform you that...your paper was not accepted for our journal / conference / seminar series ; your application was not successful). Patience and perseverance pay off in the long run. If you are not somewhat passionate about doing research it is perhaps too demanding or boring: not too much social interaction in terms of work, may have to work on weekends,... Tell everyone about your work, ask questions,... It is useless to think: I rather don't say anything so that for sure I don't appear stupid. Present your work everywhere you can. Be open to your advisor, make him push you.

#### **Quote 3**

The departments have the power to decide the profile for the opening, the internal and the external expert evaluation panel. Say that an established professor has an 'hidden

agenda' in pushing his candidate. He can influence each step. If this established professor has the trust of the head of department (as often happens), the procedure will be completely corrupted: Requisites shaped for a certain person. External commission selected to appreciate certain specific topics and groups. A candidate screening can be put on place to filter out strong competitors for minor deficiencies.

#### **Quote 4**

Can either be done through the specific shaping of a call text - which is fairly ok - or through unequal and unfair assessment of candidates, which I have experienced several times. It can vary what counts as an internal candidate. In the most egregious cases I've seen, candidates currently working at another university, but a friend of the internal review committee member.

#### **Quote 5**

Same group or department, including being a former student of that department or group. I have witnessed several cases of jobs or financing materialising out of "nowhere" for the favoured PhD student or postdoctoral worker of certain professors who work on what that professor likes or who can be trusted to tow the line. Internal candidates are further advantaged because those responsible for hiring can attest to their credentials, their personality and what they can bring to the table. For external candidates this becomes harder to verify in advance. They will have to take a chance on an unknown.

## **Conclusion**

Despite being essential for research production in academia, temporary researchers are hardly ever recognized or supported (Woolston, 2020). Furthermore, this is an understudied population, where there is currently insufficient knowledge regarding their career situation and few studies have addressed their work conditions. The aim of this project is to expand the knowledge around junior researchers and their experiences of discrimination, working life conditions, career prospects in academia and workplace culture in Norway. We have gathered information from 193 junior researchers working in Norway. A clear majority of respondents indicated that they considered the process to achieve a permanent position in academia in Norway, to be demanding and to have excessive requirements. A clear perception that internal candidates are

avored is also emphasized by many. We could not reach a significant amount of people that recently left academia. Our results, therefore, shall be considered as a rather conservative estimate of these two issues. When internal favoritism exists, fair competition is significantly hindered. We here argue that the perceived existence of favouritism in regards to internal candidates decreases the number of permanent positions openly available, thus contributing to further increasing the competition and making the application process excessively demanding. It is reasonable to consider this mechanism to be co-responsible in generating an atmosphere of mistrust within the research community and in regard with related institutions. Furthermore, individual confidence and work-life balance can also be affected, confirming for Norway, the European trends observed by the work of Castellacci and Viñas-Bardolet (2020). In the questions of our survey, we also asked what defines an internal candidate. After grouping the various contributions, an overall description of the internal candidate bias can be depicted. While some participants reported such bias as an unfair advantage over the competitors, others suggested becoming the internal candidate in order to increase the chances of obtaining a permanent position. Further analysis concerning associations between these observations and its consequences for the candidates, on career tips from researchers to junior researchers\*\*, will be provided in forthcoming publications based on the collected data.

\*\*As an attachment to this report, we include the career tips given by the participants willing to disclose their personal experience and suggestions to their peers (document titled Career within academia, Tips and Suggestions from researchers to junior researchers).

## Acknowledgements

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