Exploring the Interplay Between Structure and Agency in the Context of Higher Education in North Macedonia:

A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Early Career Academics

Martin Galevski
Department of Education
University of Oxford



Supervised by
Professor David Mills and
Professor Lynn McAlpine

Word count: 98,231

Submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
January 2021

THESIS ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the experiences of early career academics (ECAs) in contemporary North North Macedonia and sets out to understand how the interplay between specific academic workplace structures and the agency of ECAs unfolds on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories.

In order to examine this research question empirically, I draw on data from semi-structured interviews with 32 ECAs working across four Macedonian universities. Their insights provide an in-depth comprehension of the agentive strategies employed by individuals and an articulation of the different structural contexts that shape and have impact on their experiences. I also interviewed 15 university administrators from the same four institutions to inform my background analysis of the Macedonian higher education landscape. The lack of research into higher education in North Macedonia means that the study can potentially make an important contribution to understanding the way this system works.

Theoretically, my study draws on Margaret Archer's work on the dynamics of interplay between structure and agency. I show how her work can be used, and taken further, to contest the dominant divisions in literature focusing on academic careers that tend either to emphasise structural factors and underplay the role of agency, or to stress the role of the individual and hence to lose sight of the structural perspective. Through my own conceptual framework, I argue that a combined structure-agency approach explored in a specific context bears more fruit in capturing empirically and explaining conceptually the experiences of ECAs. It does so while drawing attention to the range of pressures and possibilities created by personal and professional relationships within and outside academia, and the range of temporal dimensions (day-to-day experiences and career trajectories) that must be managed and reconciled.

The findings of this thesis situated in the under-researched context of a more peripheral higher education system point to a new perspective on the dynamics of the structure-agency interplay that challenges current understandings of the structure-agency debate in relation to academic life. What I show is that the constraining and unstable nature of formal and informal structures that ECAs in North Macedonia face on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories encourages agency as a tool for survival, rather than leading to its reduction. Existing workplace structures - such as, formal policies and procedures, unwritten rules, hierarchies, nepotism, political patronage and cronyism - do not prevent ECAs from exercising agency, but instead require them to be even more agentic, agile and strategic if they wish to remain and succeed. As my empirical work makes clear, it is perfectly possible for ECAs to feel constrained by the workplace structures in which they find themselves. Yet, at the same time they can undermine or take advantage of them by creating their own spaces and finding unexpected ways through barriers via rule-breaking, informal dealings, seeking dependencies, subtle and covert acts of emotional disengagement, resistance or even sabotage. Even in cases when ECAs had negative experiences with the structures in place, it was, oddly enough, the very existence of such structural barriers that helped them discover and exercise agency. This recognition moves away from a one-sided emphasis on structural constraints, which covers only the negative implications and neglects the possibility that frustrating experiences with structures can stimulate, and often necessitate, agentic thinking and action. In this respect, the thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between structure and agency, and adds complexity and richness to the structure-agency debate by uncovering a-typical ways of exercising agency, while exposing a different and essentially more rounded representation of the structures that influence the practice of ECAs. Looking forward, one wonders the extent to which this more nuanced understanding of the interplay of structure and agency will emerge in studies of other peripheral systems.

A LETTER OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A personal reflection on my academic journey

> More than five years ago I started my doctorate. After spending a year at Cambridge for my Master's and two more years in Finland, Austria and China for another Master's, I decided to apply for a DPhil at Oxford with a wish to pursue my interest in higher education research. For as long as I can remember I always wanted to be an academic, so being accepted at Oxford was a dream come true and a step closer to my lifelong goal. Looking back, when I started my Bachelor studies in North Macedonia I quickly became intrigued with the lives and histories of academics and the very existence of academia. I can remember observing who these people were, how they talked and acted, why they behaved in certain ways, and what their way of seeing the world was. What I didn't know at the time, however, was that, just a few years later, I would dedicate my Master's and Doctoral research trying to understand their experiences.

Beginning this thesis with my own academic journey might seem odd to some. But the description above perfectly illustrates the purpose of my work here, namely to invite the reader into the lived experiences of individuals, the way they make connection between events and how they reflect back on their thinking and actions. Another, and personally more important, reason why I have decided to briefly tell my story, is to show respect towards the participants who gave their time to this study and who placed their trust in me as a researcher. Just as they spoke openly about many events and personal experiences, I have tried to do the same.

Since I started my PhD many things have changed. My first love passed away and I will never see her again. My mother and father both had difficult cancer surgery. I struggled with depression and anxiety. I ended one relationship and started another. And got infected with COVID-19 weeks before my intended submission date. While these situations were extremely painful and difficult, they proved to be somehow empowering. I chose to look at them as experiences that trained my resilience and ultimately made me more persistent.

Over time, I changed too. The PhD process brought me to new places of thinking about myself and my own work. Now I have a much richer and deeper understanding of who I am, where I live and what I know. Working on the thesis, I began to realize that I cannot separate the thesis from the researcher. As Reay (1998: 2) notes, 'all research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography'. My field work and later my analysis entailed being 'reflexive' (Archer 2003) about my own actions in addition to examining the reflexivity and interpretations of my participants.

Some of my own experiences as an early career academic in Oxford were quite different from those of my participants: I never had to deal with an 'absent' supervisor, I did not have any problem accessing the books and resources that I needed for my research, and there was no lack of opportunities for networking. In these moments, I realised how lucky I have been to be at Oxford. At the same, it often struck me that some of my own experiences, dilemmas and challenges had a resemblance to what some participants were describing in the Macedonian context. There were times where I was facing difficult moments in my personal or work life, while I was writing and living with the challenges and experiences that my participants described. Despite this often being emotionally difficult, it was perhaps the thing that also helped me the most. Looking at the ways

ECAs were responding to some of the challenges influenced my own agency and helped me find ways to overcome barriers. So before moving on to acknowledge the support, guidance and love of many, I would like to thank all my participants for their investment in making my thesis possible, for offering a new perspective on my own life, and most importantly, for their powerful and fascinating insights into academic life in North Macedonia.

I owe a great debt to my supervisors Prof Lynn McAlpine and Prof David Mills for all their support, encouragement and advice which often extended beyond my dissertation. Working with you was a true bliss. I was lucky enough to have two such incredible supervisors, a supervisory dream team, always there to inspire and allow me to see the 'bigger picture' when I was struggling to see it myself. You believed in me even when I almost lost faith in myself – and I will remain eternally grateful for that. Lynn, there is no way to thank you enough for your humane, genuine and humble approach towards research and life. Your scholarly passion and commitment to understanding the lives of ECAs is unparalleled, and very inspiring to me. I am endlessly grateful for your extremely concise comments on my dissertation and for sharing practical advice on how I can overcome personal moments of struggle and uncertainty. Much of my inspiration to do a study on ECAs came from reading your superb qualitative work. David, thank you for always pushing me further and opening new horizons of thinking. Your anthropological perspective has been of such an important value for my own understanding of academic life, beyond this thesis. You challenged me, and with confidence, waited for me to find my own voice. Your encouraging words for whatever I have decided to do have been invaluable for an early career resercher. It has been a true pleasure to have you as a mentor, and you have been an incredible support.

My thanks also goes to all my friends and colleagues, old and new, who have supported me in my DPhil journey and have made my stay in Oxford and Skopje so enjoyable. Their constant care, comments and kind words of encouragement have kept me going. I am very blessed to have you around me. Finally, my biggest gratitude goes to my parents and my sister for supporting me all these years and for teaching me the value of hard work and the importance of education. Without your unconditional support I may never have gotten to where I am today as a person and as a professional. It would take several lifetimes to be able to thank you properly, but hopefully one will be enough.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS ABSTRACT ..... *i*
A LETTER OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ..... *ii*
TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... *iv*
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES ..... *viii*
LIST OF APPENDICES ..... *vii*
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ..... *viii*
CHAPTER 1 ..... *1*
1. Research question 1
2. Conceptual basis and theoretical relevance 1
3. Analytical relevance of the Macedonian case 4
4. The methodological approach and its relevance 6
5. Outline of chapters 7
CHAPTER 2 ..... *10*
1. Introduction 10
2. Structure, agency and their interplay in social theory 12
3. Different perspectives guiding research on academic careers 14
3.1. Structure-oriented explanations of academic careers 14
3.2. Agency-oriented explanations of academic careers 25
3.3. Explanations of academic careers considering the interplay between structure and agency 36
4. A consideration of Archer's exploration of structure and agency 41
5. Conceptual framework: A way forward for exploring the interplay between structure and agency in the context of debates on the academic profession 52
6. Context matters: exploration of the Macedonian higher education system 65
6.1. Structural convergence between higher education systems in CEE: can we speak of CEE as a distinct region? 66
6.2. What about agency in the CEE context? 69
6.3. What can the exploration of the interplay between structure and agency in this new context reveal? And why is such a study important? 71
6.4. Why North Macedonia? 72
6.5. Why ECAs? 74

7. Research question 77

CHAPTER 3 ..... *80*

1. Introduction 80

2. Situating my work methodologically: a qualitative approach 80

3. Participants, selection criteria and recruitment 81

4. Design of the research protocol 87

5. Preparation for the interviews and the interview procedure 91

6. Data analysis 95

7. Data reporting 99

8. Ethical considerations and anonymity 102

CHAPTER 4 ..... *104*

1. Introduction 104

2. Political context: two external and two internal challenges 104

3. Economic context: high rates of unemployment 119

4. Social context: migration 121

5. Conclusions 124

CHAPTER 5 ..... *127*

1. Introduction 127

2. The Macedonian higher education: history, expansion and types of institutions 128

3. The academic landscape: figures and structure 133

4. Higher education governance: system and institutional level 137

5. The international arena: the colonisation effect of European initiatives and their domestic mutation 145

6. Conclusions 153

CHAPTER 6 ..... *158*

1. Introduction 158

2. The communist past and academia: a burden for some, a positive heritage for others 159

3. The views of UAs on matters of governance: system and institutional reforms 162

4. The academic journey: recruitment, progression and retention 167

4.1. Recruitment 167

4.2. Promotion 175

4.3. Retention 180

5. Day-to-day work arrangements: workload, mentorship and participation in decision-making 183

6. Conclusions 186

CHAPTER 7 ..... *189*

1. Introduction 189

2. The past: early autonomy, dependence and networking 190

3. The present: time pressures and challenges of managing the different roles 208

4. The future: uncertainty, hope and breaking the mould 232

5. Conclusions 238

CHAPTER 8 ..... *241*

1. Introduction 241

2. The past: interest, attraction, entrance routes and intentionality 242

3. The present: 'the waiting room' and aspirations for dependence 255

4. The future: narratives of leaving, staying and ambivalence 274

4.1. Narratives of leaving 274

4.2. Narratives of staying 280

4.3. Ambivalent narratives: to stay or to go? 287

5. Conclusions 293

CHAPTER 9 ..... *298*

1. Introduction 298

2. Findings and contribution 299

3. Research design and methodology 314

4. Implications for policy and recommendations 317

5. Avenues for future research 318

6. A closing and an opening 320

List of References *322*

APPENDIX 1: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE (ECAs) *343*

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ECAs) *345*

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (UAs) *347*

LIST OF APPENDICES

1 DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE (ECAs)

2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ECAs)

3 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (UAs)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARWU	ACADEMIC RANKING OF WORLD UNIVERSITIES
CEE	CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE
ECAs	EARLY CAREER ACADEMICS
ENQA	EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
NPM	NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT
EU	EUROPEAN UNION
EUA	EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION
FYROM	THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA
MAAS	MACEDONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
MP	MEMBER OF THE PARLIAMENT
SDSM	SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC UNION OF NORTH MACEDONIA
SSORM	STATE STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA
SEEU	SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY
UAs	UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS
VMRO-DPMNE	INTERNAL MACEDONIAN REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION – DEMOCRATIC PARTY FOR MACEDONIAN NATIONAL UNITY
WFD	WESTMINSTER FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. Research question

This qualitative study examines the experiences of early career academics (ECAs) in contemporary North Macedonia and sets out to understand how the interplay between specific academic workplace structures and the agency of ECAs unfolds on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories.

2. Conceptual basis and theoretical relevance

The importance of this question stems initially from contemporary social theory research, where - in an effort to move away from a binary divide of structure versus agency - a consensus is emerging that bridging the two elements together is the most acceptable and effective mechanism for exploring the long-standing structure-agency debate. The available literature on academic careers, however, rarely considers studying both structure and agency as linked components, and quite often the two concepts have been either polarised or presented in a way in which each downplays the other.

Namely, the tendency in most classical and many contemporary accounts of academic careers has been to emphasise structure over agency. Although important, these accounts tend to position academics (particularly those in the early career stage) in a deterministic and invasive manner, as products of the system around them. As a result, any attention to the ways in which academics can exert influence over their lives is lost. More recently, individual agency is beginning to receive increasing attention within the academic career literature. However, there

is a tendency of falling back onto the opposite mono-causal account due to a failure to appropriately acknowledge and grapple with the structural contexts in order to understand the spaces for agency. As a result, and just as importantly, this has artificially inflated the degree of agency. So, by ignoring structures, or avoiding dealing with them, this literature falls short of capturing the messiness and complexity that structures can add to the debate on academic careers and the ways in which they can enable, limit, construct and shape academics' behaviour. Hence, whether one takes a structural or an agentic approach, the outcome of the two dominant perspectives has been the same: they both remain incomplete and unsatisfactory, as they both ignore the dynamics created by the interplay between structure and agency.

To this end, I argue that there is great value in re-approaching more carefully the structure-agency debate within higher education. Through my own conceptual framework, I argue that a combined structure-agency approach explored in a specific context bears more fruit in capturing empirically and explaining conceptually the experiences of ECAs. It does so while drawing attention to the range of pressures and possibilities created by personal and professional relationships within and outside academia, and the range of temporal dimensions (day-to-day experiences and career trajectories) that must be managed and reconciled. In this respect, my conceptual frameworks respond to a lacuna, namely a more nuanced representation of the experiences of academics, moving away from seeing the individual (i.e. the agent) as being separated from his/her context (i.e. the structure), and towards studying both structure and agency as elements that influence one another.

Specifically, I propose three key ideas that lay the foundation of my conceptual framework: (1) An adequate and richer understanding of academic careers must account for the complex and multi-layered *interplay* between structure and agency, and this interplay needs to be examined

in a particular *context* rather than at a general level. (2) Comprehending the multifaceted nature of academics' decision-making requires an examination of the complexity that *relationships*, both within and outside of academia, add to interplay between structure and agency. And (3) The relationship between structure and agency exposes two types of temporalities where structure and agency are at interplay, requiring closer attention: *career trajectories* and *day-to-day experiences*.

In developing my proposition, I draw on Margaret Archer's work on the dynamics of interplay between structure and agency. I show how her work can be used, and taken further, to contest the dominant divisions in the existing higher education literature on academic careers that either emphasises structural factors and undermines agency, or stresses the role of the individual and loses sight of the structural perspective. In recent years, higher education scholars have shown an increasing interest in her work. However, the large majority of these scholars have been primarily interested in exploring the concept of agency, while structures only enter as incidental modifiers, if discussed at all. In this sense, they have not engaged with a suggestion that lies at the heart of Archer's argument: accentuating the importance of looking at the interplay, rather than at agency alone.

I use my conceptual framework in the context of Macedonian higher education as the basis for my discussion of the day-to-day experiences and career trajectories of ECAs working in the system. Such focus allows me to think about what is unique to the interplay of structure and agency in North Macedonia, what is present that we already know about from other contexts, and how this new insight contributes to regional and international debates on higher education, and debates around using structure and agency to theorise academic careers. In a related, and no less significant aspect, the present study seeks to illuminate new, atypical and unexpected

ways of exercising agency in view of the specific structural conditions that influence the practice of Macedonian academics.

In this respect, by focusing on North Macedonia, I draw attention to the importance of discussing theoretical debates, such as structure and agency, within unexplored peripheral contexts. I argue that examining the interplay between structure and agency in a new context can give us a sense of a particular configuration of structural and agentic factors that was not available before. A configuration that one could later compare and discuss in relation to existing research dealing with the structure-agency debate, in order to show what, if any, differences are evident which we were previously unaware of. These elements, taken together, create circumstances in which a new theoretical potential is likely to materialise.

3. Analytical relevance of the Macedonian case

The significance of my thesis, however, is not just theoretical. An equally, if not more, important contribution is given in providing empirical evidence concerning the experiences of ECAs in North Macedonia, and an understanding of what it means to be an ECA on the periphery. While the experiences of ECAs has attracted increasing attention from scholars for more than a decade now, the available studies have mostly been devoted to ECAs in the non-periphery (i.e. Western Europe, United States, Canada, Australia and few other places).

Useful and relevant as this literature might be, it hardly touches upon the situation in academic peripheries. Both the general academic career literature and the literature focused on ECAs have fallen short of offering an insight into what goes on in less mature and developing higher education systems such as the Macedonian one. In this sense, what is often described as a global

trend in the literature should perhaps more accurately be described as a trend concerning the 'Western' world. This geographical asymmetry is something that we should be aware of and address when talking about the experiences of ECAs.

Simultaneously, with few exceptions, the existing discussions of the lives of academics in peripheral regions, such as the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, has been sporadic, and filled with anecdotes, mostly consisting of reports produced by journalists, politicians, and of course academics. In many cases, these accounts of academic life are animated in light of the image of the senior professor, which usually attracts severe criticism; whereas the quite distinct conditions and experiences of ECAs are rarely part of these discussions. Accordingly, it seems necessary to broaden the empirical frame of contemporary discussions on ECAs' careers, by attending to contexts that have been poorly investigated, if at all. In this light, I hope that this thesis will increase the 'peripheral' presence in higher education literature.

Being situated in North Macedonia, my thesis clearly signals the importance of examining higher education and academic life in systems that have remained 'under the radar' of higher education scholarship. The Macedonian case is ideally placed for the purposes of generating novel understandings in a previously unexplored context, for several reasons. Firstly, the focus on North Macedonia is timely considering that the country has, in recent years, experienced drastic transitions in its society, politics and economy; and its higher education system, equally, has been undergoing significant changes. Secondly, what adds another layer of complexity is the institutional set-up of universities in North Macedonia: the legacy of the communist past; the public and private composition of universities; the notable role that teaching plays; the hierarchical features of its academic setting; and the political influence over the system.

Finally, the decision to choose North Macedonia as a case in point was influenced by my own national origin and my previous (almost decade-long) research experience in the area of higher education within the country. I believe that my understanding of the country's history, its language, and its higher education system puts me in a good position to obtain a firm analysis of the areas that I am interested in – which perhaps could not have been so thoroughly done If I had examined another country.

4. The methodological approach and its relevance

This study aims to establish itself as a pioneer vis-á-vis both the specific country I examine and the broader Central and Eastern European region, as there have hardly been any studies conducted on this topic and in such great depth. To the best of my knowledge, there is no other biographically informed analysis of the experiences of early career academics in the region. Although a few of the issues discussed in my thesis might have been touched upon by other researchers in the region, such studies remain limited, fragmented, atheoretical and in almost all cases quantitative.

I was the author of one such quantitative study in the context of Macedonian higher education in 2014 (on a sample of 487 academics). I realised quite early in the process of its writing that the study fulfilled the function of providing aggregated data as a way of understanding the 'big picture' of the situation in academia; yet, that it still proved difficult to go beyond a general assessment of the landscape. As I dug into explaining the data, I found myself reaching 'blind alleys' in my effort to clarify the deeper causes behind the issues reported by participants.

Hence, one of my first tasks as I began my doctoral studies was to find ways to fill in this element of the picture which I believed was missing. To this end, I chose a qualitative perspective to offer a portrayal of the experiences of ECAs and to arrive at a reasonably close approximation of their lives and thinking. Ultimately, I believe that the qualitative lens provides for a better representation of ECAs' voices and their sense of empowerment and resilience, which I truly hope will benefit and inspire other ECAs who might read this study. I personally would find this last point very important and rewarding if achieved.

5. Outline of chapters

This thesis consists of nine chapters (including the Introduction and Conclusions). In Chapter 2, I start by theorising the representation of structure and agency within higher education, and how debates around these two concepts play out in existing research on academics. I consider the overriding themes, simultaneously offering a critique of these discussions with regard to what they emphasise and obscure, and the implications that this has for our understanding of the lives and experiences of academics. Later in the chapter, I use this discussion to advance my own conceptual framework for looking at the experiences of academics. I conclude this chapter by presenting the research question of this thesis.

In Chapter 3, I outline the reasons why particular methodological choices were made and the relevance of these choices for addressing the research question of this study. In particular, I explain who the participants are; why and how they were chosen; how the research was developed and conducted; the way the data was analysed and verified; how results have been presented; and what considerations of ethics and securing anonymity were made.

In Chapter 4, I briefly outline the political, economic and social contexts in North Macedonia, and how these three contexts have a direct bearing on the country's higher education system. The underlying aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader with the broader Macedonian context and to address a common problem found within existing research in the field, namely that higher education is often treated as a phenomenon isolated from economic, social and political developments, or from society in general.

In Chapter 5, based on insights from previous research, I turn my focus to higher education in North Macedonia and provide a closer analysis of some of the key pressures and challenges that the sector is currently facing. My aim here is to inform the reader about different features of the Macedonian higher education system, such as the profile and number of universities, the state of the academic community, the governance of the system and other issues relevant for the analysis that comes later in the thesis.

In Chapter 6, due to the under-researched nature of Macedonian higher education, my aim is to generate greater understanding of the situation in areas where very little can be grasped from official documents or from existing research studies on higher education previously conducted in the country. The primary source of evidence on which I draw here is the data gathered in interviews with university administrators (UAs) holding positions as Rectors, Deans, Vice-Deans and similar positions, in the four universities covered by the study.

In Chapter 7, I move to one of the core issues of my thesis, the day-to-day experiences of ECAs. Based on a fine-grained description of the roles, actions, routines, time pressures and relationships that characterise the everyday work of ECAs, this chapter analyses how ECAs construct, negotiate and experience time on the everyday basis, while attending to the dynamics

of interplay between structure and agency. The daily experiences on which I report here are presented on a past-present-future continuum in order to enable me to track the changes that have occurred over time and at different stages.

In Chapter 8, I turn my focus to the career trajectories of ECAs by examining their past and present experiences and intentions for the future. Situated in the structure-agency interplay, I focus on discovering the ways in which ECAs' career trajectories have unfolded as a result of their own intentionality, and of the extent to which structures and other sources of influence have an impact on their decisions, actions and thinking.

In Chapter 9, I present the key conclusions and contributions of my thesis, drawing together the key arguments and findings and relating these back to the core research question guiding my work. My primary focus is on the empirical contributions that this thesis offers for understanding the experiences of ECAs in the periphery, as well as the unique ways in which the structure-agency interplay unfolds in the Macedonian context. Here, I also propose several policy recommendations and avenues for future research

CHAPTER 2

THEORISING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY: AN EXPLORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH ON ACADEMICS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

1. Introduction

The structure-agency debate has been the focus of sociological, philosophical and anthropological attention since the origins of the social sciences took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has remained at the heart of social theory ever since (Elder-Vass 2010). The central focus of this long-standing structure-agency debate is the extent to which human behaviour is determined by social structures: that is, whether an individual acts as a free agent or in a manner dictated by social structures (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Archer 2003). In tackling this problem, a myriad of approaches have been developed over the years, from extreme structuralists to extreme rationalists, as well as more moderate understandings between these two extremes. However, the structure-agency debate is far from over (Tan 2011). It continues to be highly relevant today, and remains the bedrock of scientific inquiries into the nature and conditions of social order and action across a vast range of disciplinary fields (Elder-Vass 2010).

In this chapter, I review the existing research on academic careers from the standpoint of structure and agency. In particular, I consider the overriding discussions and underlying assumptions of this line of research; at the same time, I offer a critique of these discussions regarding what they emphasise, what they obscure, and the implications this has for our understanding of the lives and experiences of academics. As will be shown in the subsequent sections, it is clear that studies have tended to focus on either structure or agency as a way of

examining academic careers, both of which are in many ways considered outdated approaches in social theory. While several academic career studies have recently attempted to re-approach the structure-agency debate, such examples remain few and are often on the margins of the literature. This raises some important questions and concerns about the conceptual rigour and the quality of the findings the existing literature has generated.

My goal is hence to suggest a new direction for research and a conceptual framework which I believe holds the most promise for studying academic careers; and which I use in subsequent chapters to frame my discussion on the day-to-day lives and careers of ECAs in North Macedonia. I see a major potential research contribution in warranting an approach that emphasises the dialectic interplay of structure and agency to allow for a more complete and more nuanced understanding of academic careers. Following recent recommendations from the literature (Kahn et al. 2012; O'Meara 2012; McAlpine and Emmioglu 2015), I argue that an adequate examination of the lives and experiences of academics needs to be located in the relationship between both structure and agency, in order to help uncover and explain the complexities, messiness and dynamism that underlie academic careers.

In what follows, in Section 2, I very briefly outline some of the key strands of literature on structure and agency in the wider social theory literature, although it is well beyond the scope of this chapter (and this thesis) to offer a complete overview of existing research. A far more fine-grained analysis, however, is then dedicated to the application of these concepts in studies of academic careers (in Section 3). In Section 4, in my effort to bring the debate on the interplay between structure and agency forward, I introduce and consider the sociological work of Margaret Archer, whose theoretical and analytical account of the relationship between structure and agency appears to confront a number of issues which I have found problematic in previous

discussions of academic careers. These discussions pave the way for the development of my own conceptual framework for looking at the interplay of structure and agency, presented in Section 5. In Section 6, I move from a broader conceptual consideration towards situating the study in the Macedonian context, by answering the following questions: what can the exploration of the interplay of structure and agency in a new context reveal and why is such a study important. Here, I also offer my reasoning for focusing on ECAs as a subject of study. I conclude this chapter by presenting the research questions that guides the thesis.

2. Structure, agency and their interplay in social theory

In social theory research, in particular in sociology, philosophy and anthropology, debates around structure and agency raise a series of very important questions: to what extent are individuals free to decide on their own action and to what extent are they constrained by the social setting in which they operate? Are explanations of phenomena to be found at the micro level of the individual or at the macro societal level? To what extent are structures stable entities and to what extent can they be changed by the actions of individuals?

These and related questions form the basis for what has come to be known as the 'structure-agency debate' in the social sciences. Captivated by this debate, researchers have developed a wide variety of approaches and theoretical perspectives which seek to address these concerns. Nevertheless, there are three broadly discernible positions on the structure-agency issue, which to some extent follow a particular temporal trajectory of development (Tan 2011):

(1) Early scholars examining the relationship between structure and agency have accorded particular attention to the influence of structure over agency. Theorists in this group have suggested a vision of the world in which powerful structures are dominant and are responsible

for orchestrating the conduct of human behaviour. Classical sociologists and philosophers such as Parsons, Marx, Durkheim and early Foucault are often cited as some of the key writers offering structural explanations. Popular theoretical conceptualisations insisting on the significance of structure include, but are certainly not limited to, structuralism, structural functionalism, and poststructuralism (Sewell 1992; King 2010).

(2) In stark contrast, others have been eager to stress the primacy of individual judgment and decision-making by emphasising individual agency over structure. In essence, these works have casted doubt about the basic tenets of the structuralist stance, and favour a reverse understanding by which people, and their actions and behaviours, are more than just a product of social conditioning. Correspondingly, this perspective suggests that society is a result of human creativity, rationality and autonomy rather than deterministic structural forces. Such sentiment is present in the work of an extensive number of authors including moral philosophers such as Smith, sociologists such as Weber and existentialists such as Sartre. Theories aligned with this view include individualism, certain 'flavours' of phenomenology and a range of theories of action and rational choice (Elder-Vass 2010).

(3) A third discernible position is adopted by scholars who have attempted to reconcile both perspectives: moving away from the debate of agency versus structure to the recognition of the dialectic interplay between the two, by rejecting the assumption that structure and agency represent a binary choice. This has been the approach adopted more recently by a number of contemporary social theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) who outlines *A Theory of Practice*, Giddens (1984) with *The Theory of Structuration*, Bandura (1986) with his *Social Cognitive Theory, and* Archer (1995) in *Realist Social Theory*. Setting aside the differences and disagreements between each of these theories, they all share the assumption that just as the

social activities of agents are moulded by structures, so too structures are re-shaped or reproduced by agents (Sewell 1992; King 2010).

3. Different perspectives guiding research on academic careers

Much in the same way as with the broader literature on social theory, the literature on academic careers can be divided into three focuses: (1) studies that offer structure-oriented explanations of academic careers; (2) studies that offer agentic-oriented explanations of academic careers; and finally, (3) studies that offer explanations of academic careers based on the interplay between structure and agency. In what follows I turn to each of these groups, emphasising some of their key strengths and weaknesses.

3.1. Structure-oriented explanations of academic careers

In the field of higher education, one strand of research on academic careers and identities suggests that academics are predominantly influenced by the structural context in which they operate. The plethora of changes affecting higher education in recent decades, which have often been portrayed as dramatic, have contributed to this tendency of seeing the structural context as more relevant than ever, if not fundamental. This outlook, when seen from authors taking a structuralist perspective, is rather pessimistic. Much of this writing depicts the structures as a constraining framework, and points to: academics' diminishing span of influence and power; declining status and rewards; more tightly defined areas of responsibility and intensified workloads; and increasing surveillance and accountability, among other things. As O'Meara et al. (2008) note, this becomes immediately visible from the repeated choice of words that are rather consistently used in these studies, such as 'decline', 'barrier', 'prevent', 'challenge', and 'survival'.

Research in the area of higher education has thus identified a wide range of structural factors impacting academic careers; even though, as Sutherland and Taylor (2011) note, the concept of 'structure' itself is typically not explicitly used as such, and is far less theorised (albeit more researched) compared to studies focusing on agency. Nevertheless, there has been a rather strong emphasis on structural influences coming into play over the last several decades. In fact, as numerous authors agree (O'Meara et al. 2008; Kahn 2009a; McAlpine et al. 2014), considerably more effort has been devoted to explaining structural properties and how they are transmitted to academics, than has been given to the other side of the equation - namely, how they are received and addressed by the academics themselves. As Gonzales (2014: 194) further observes, 'much of the research on faculty is anchored in structural and meso-level theories where faculty are not viewed as agents capable of steering and crafting their careers against the pressures of the political economy'. Reflecting on the literature on ECAs, Kahn (2009a: 198) arrives at a similar conclusion: 'it is clear that higher education studies reflect a dominant socio-cultural approach in this area of research, with individual agency effectively determined by structural influences'. In this respect, the structure-oriented body of research accentuates that the experiences of academics are significantly influenced by structural arrangements which determine what individuals can or cannot do, as well as what they can be or become as professionals (Becher and Trowler 2001; Henkel 2004; Churchman 2006). Scanning the literature provides compelling evidence to this end.

In the following subsections, I elaborate on the different, but dominantly present, structural traits evident in the literature on academic careers and higher education more broadly. At the center of these studies are the varying structural factors that bound academic careers and impose limitations on them. Much of this writing - sometimes implicitly - portrays structures as highly influential and difficult to cross for individuals, and as having mostly negative consequences

for academic identities by creating deeply unstable trajectories for those opting for a career in academia. They not only explain the formation of structural orders, but also underline the roles these structures play for academic careers, both collectively and individually. In that respect, these studies are significant in that they reveal much about the contextual shaping of the academic profession and are certainly necessary in explaining the challenging circumstances faced by academics**.** Yet, this literature, if read on its own, also significantly limits our ability to understand the role and influence of individual agency and is, above all, unable to capture the full complexity of academic careers, which, as I argue in Section 4 of this chapter, requires inquiry both into the structural context and the role of individual agency.

Below, I underscore three structural forces (i.e. explanations) prevailing in existing studies: *ideological*, *institutional*, and *socio-economic*. In addressing these forces, it is relevant to underline that they do not always exert influence in a clearly delineated way with stable boundaries that cause them to stand apart from each other. Rather, they often work together and overlap, or even partly contradict each other. For instance, it is important to understand that ideological forces can often be found in institutional policy narratives aimed towards realising them. In a nutshell, using these three categories by no means suggests that they in practice materialise as pure categories. Moreover, it is worth noting that I do not attempt here to quantify the frequency with which these types of forces do or do not occur in practice. I simply note that these structural forces occur with great regularity in a wide variety of higher education studies on academic careers.

Ideological forces

An abundance of higher education studies have made compelling arguments concerning the profound impact of ideological structural forces that have come into play as central features

shaping academic careers. The most prominent example may be seen in the penetration of the neo-liberal doctrine into higher education and its far-reaching influence on the academic profession (Thorkelson 2016). In these studies, academics have typically emerged as disillusioned and distressed individuals whose ability to carry out the work they enjoy is constrained and subverted by the infiltration of neoliberalism; causing precarity and insecurity for academics, while effectively masking a prioritisation of economic concerns and quantitative metrics (L. Archer 2008a) [1].

Discussing the wider extension of the market logic to higher education, most commonly exemplified as targets, benchmarks, rankings, assessments, and other measures, it is claimed that an 'audit culture' has become a prevailing and deeply-rooted attribute of contemporary universities, significantly imposing new regulatory regimes on academic life, possibly for generations to come (Strathern 2000). Academic ranking and measurements of research productivity are often provided as examples that perfectly fit this audit ideology an underlying assumption of which is a deep trust in numbers as an objective way of representing things (Collini 2012). Part of the seduction of audit targets, as Strathern (2000) argues, is the creation of an illusion that an individual can name their own targets: whereas the sobering reality is that the boundaries and rules of the game are predetermined. This has given rise to a 'technology of accounting' (Kelly and Boden 2014), where one must compete intensely - and quite early into their careers - for the scarcity of academic jobs available. Davies and Petersen (2005) offer a quite pessimistic picture in arguing that it is not, ultimately, possible to resist the reach of the technologies of neoliberalism: subjects will always be subjugated and played by the system,

[1] I reference Louis Archer as L. Archer (i.e. with her name initial) in order to avoid confusion with Margaret Archer.

whether or not they are aware of it; and hence, they contend, it is not possible to resist the onslaught of neoliberalism.

These arguments correspond closely to much of the New Public Management (NPM) discourse which is often considered as being closely connected to the neoliberal logic. In fact, an extensive literature addresses how academics' work has changed as a result of the increasing reliance on NPM principles in higher education. Writers who document the impact of NPM have pointed to the increasingly normative power that it exerts in higher education, and the emotional burden that it can cause to academics (Bleiklie et al. 2011). Davies and Petersen (2005), illustrating the seductiveness of managerial discourses, argue that new managerialism within higher education has often come to be seen as an almost inevitable and virtuous necessity that cannot be challenged. That is, as a quasi 'natural' authority - hence not needing much legitimation effort (Felt 2009). Many authors have highlighted the risk attached to these developments and warned against the rise of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1999; Jessop 2017). The increasing reliance on the principles of NPM in the academic domain, it is argued, has resulted in a striking re-casting of the language being imposed on academics - for instance, the requirement to describe their publication record purely in 'numbers' or to act un-reflexively when confronted with the NPM logic (Deem and Brehony 2005; Leišytė 2016).

Following an ideological perspective, others have drawn attention to the concept of the 'knowledge-based economy' as another dominant paradigm which has often been indicated as a key legitimating concept of the neo-liberal university (Olssen and Peters 2007; Galevski 2013a). The key idea behind this concept - which has been most forcefully, though not exclusively, evident on European soil - is that knowledge production geared towards driving economic growth would increase economic prosperity and would position the EU as ‘the most

dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy' (European Council 2000: 3), whilst European education would become a 'world reference' (European Council 2000: 19). Almost two decades after these statements were made, a torrent of criticism has subsequently emerged. Most notably, after the beginning of the global economic crisis in 2008 - not just in respect to the applicability and achievements of the knowledge-based economy as an engine of economic growth, but also in terms of the consequences that it has produced for higher education and for the character of universities. The penetration of the knowledge-based economy, it can be claimed, has increased the pressure on academics to become commercial knowledge producers and to demonstrate the economic benefit (or 'impact', as it is commonly referred to in these discourses) of their work - the definition of which is subject to a range of different views. The increasing expectations of relevance, and not just in economic terms, have resulted in academics losing their control over setting the goals of their own work practice and organisational environment (Kogan 2000; Musselin 2005). At the very least, studies (see for example Gibbons et al. 1994 and Nowotny et al. 2003, as some of the earliest contributions) seem to suggest a decisive shift in emphasis from what Boyer (1990) called the 'scholarship of discovery' for its own sake towards more utilitarian considerations, or to use Boyer's terms again, the 'scholarship of application'.

Reflecting on the ideologies outlined above, the most fundamental and obvious problem is that ideological structures are often presented as deeply entrenched, rigid and immutable. Put simply, they are as if cast in stone. What tends to get lost as a result is the influence and relevance of academics' own action. These ideologies (e.g. neo-liberalism, marketisation, new public management approaches, knowledge-based economy and so on), regardless of their potential hegemonic and pervasive character, 'are not in themselves influences, but attempts to influence', as Louise Archer (2007: 27) rightfully reminds us in her discussion of ideologies.

In this sense, too, they involve both impingement upon the subject and heterogeneous reception by the subject (L. Archer 2008a). It is hence important to remain aware that academics do not simply submit to such ideologies, but can also refuse, rework and resist them in a number of ways, as Canaan and Shumar (2008), L. Archer (2008a), Collini (2012), Thorkelson (2016) and many others have clearly shown.

As Clegg (2005) correctly notes, one of the problems with the critique of the current conditions of 'governmentality' (Rose 1999) in higher education is that there is a risk of overstating the case and not delineating the ways in which, in practice, academics exercise considerable personal, or as Baez (2000) puts it, ‘critical’ agency. In other words, human subjectivity is eliminated and or severely disregarded.

This is not to deny that structures of all kinds can remain powerful even when confronted with agentic efforts, individual or collective. Yet, I argue that in addition to exploration of whether structures remain immune to agentive deliberations, what requires additional examination is the set of factors that accords them this immunity. Attributing responsibility for the corporatisation of universities, or of the academic profession, entirely to broader ideological interests is to disregard the role that academics themselves have played in this process (that many of them now criticise, but also partially continue to perpetuate), as Lynch and Ivancheva (2015) have rightly observed. Clegg (2006) makes a persuasive case in arguing that by accentuating structural developments (and not only those that are ideological in nature) as almost inevitable and unavoidable, academic scholars have in some ways downplayed and undermined their own personal power as academics. Moreover, she contends that without an account that recognises 'ourselves' (i.e. academics) as agents, we ontologically undermine the grounds for hope that

academics can influence the shape of higher education - an argument that also appears to stand in relation to all other structural forces.

Institutional forces

The university setting is another place around which scholars have examined structures. This literature focuses primarily on the institutional structures that underlie academic careers and govern academics' behaviour within the organisation. Through the lens of the organisation, various structural aspects impacting the careers and lives of academics have already been examined. This long list includes research on: entrance and promotion procedures; reward systems; funding and pay-scale mechanisms; institutional regulatory regimes and policy documents; issues of management, governance and decision-making; requirements connected to teaching, research and administration.

Inclination towards such structural perspectives is most evident amongst institutional theorists of higher education who emphasise structures often to the point where the ability of the individual to act is presented as being completely shaped by the institutional environment (Cai and Mehari 2015). Research building from this perspective generally considers the processes by which structures become established as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour within universities, in ways that ultimately shape academics' career choices, lifestyle preferences, aspirations and values (e.g. Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Morphew and Huisman 2002; Gornitzka 1999; Frølich et al. 2013). It stresses how individual behaviour grows top-down from a set of rules, norms and ideas within the organisation, rather than examining how bottom-up initiatives influence institutional structures.

While these studies have offered important insight into institutional arrangements and their influence on academic careers, they simultaneously sharply limit our ability to understand the role and influence of academics' agency over, or in view of, organisational structures. The broader literature of institutional theory, which has been used extensively in organisational sociology and management studies, has long been critiqued for a similar over-emphasis on structural determinants and a corresponding neglect of the role of the individual. Commentaries by several leading institutional theorists in the field of higher education have acknowledged the failure of work employing this perspective to bring together insights from both micro- and macro-level studies (Glaser 2001; Cai and Mehari 2015).

In their systematic review of the use of institutional theory in higher education research, Cai and Mehari (2015: 4) conclude that 'while new institutionalism theoretically accounts for the similarity or stability of organisational arrangements in a given organisational field, it ignores the roles of actors in institutional change'. Against this background, they call for more scholarly attention to be paid to micro-level institutional analysis, the role of human agency, and logics in action. Much in the same vein, Gumport (2012) argues that most of neo-institutional theory, as currently applied in higher education research, still, and in her view unjustly, suggests that agency (if conceptualised at all) is largely determined by the organisational context. Glaser (2001: 2) refers to this type of research as being 'quasi-deterministic because it embraces all determinants of action and leaves no room for an intentional actor'. Moreover, he finds institutional theory to be strongly simplified in higher education research, as changes in institutional arrangements are not accounted for appropriately - a limitation also echoed more recently by Cai and Mehari (2015).

A second and closely related problem is how this literature deals with the notion of change, an issue equally present in other structure-oriented studies. Discussions on organisational structures often imply stability and for this reason, the question of how and why structural patterns change over time remains unclear. There is a tendency towards the portrayal of structure as static, and in favour of structural reproduction, even when actors (i.e. academics) do not desire and are critical of their reproduction. Consequently, the capacity to transform structures is not immediately apparent and how academics might generate change in structures through their agency is insufficiently investigated. This, I argue, is a long-standing problem which is not only evident in more recent research, but also in some of the most prominent and seminal works on the academic profession, such as Clark's (1983) *The Higher Education System*, Bourdieu's (1988) *Homo Academicus* and Becher and Trowler's (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories*.

A final limitation relates to a disproportionate attention being given to official documents and institutional regulations, which often results in descriptions of institutional processes as imagined in policy documents rather than how they are put into practice; even less considered is the question of how these are experienced or modified by academics on the ground. This is particularly evident in studies that describe the workings of promotion systems (e.g. Perlmutter 2010; Müller and Martha 2015; Leišytė and Wilkesmann 2016), where the emphasis is on generic and linear descriptions which fail to account for the more complex entanglement of individual careers with institutional and national policies. In this respect, what is lost is a more refined presentation of the contradictions and gaps characterising the nature of promotion and similar processes.

Socio-economic forces

This body of literature points to the ways in which academic careers are framed by broader socio-economic structural forces. The central argument of authors in this group gravitates around the observation that academic careers, as well as the way decisions are made by individual academics, are characterised by strong socio-economic considerations and contextualisations, from the moment one enters academia up to the decision to stay in the system or leave it. Put simply, socio-economic forces are assumed to broaden or narrow the available career possibilities. A significant number of studies in this group have focused on investigating so-called 'push' and 'pull' socio-economic factors as reasons for making career moves among academics. Explanations assuming that academics' thinking is governed by such structural forces are most evident in the literature on leaving the academic profession (see for example Smart 1990; Barnes et al. 1998; Rosser 2004; Rabe and Ragunana 2011). In this light, personal values are mostly seen as irrelevant or merely adaptive to the structure of opportunity (for example, the job market). The logical defects of such an approach in the context of agency are obvious (even in purely linguistic terms) given that metaphors of 'push' and 'pull' factors endorse social determinism rather than social conditioning.

Moreover, what this type of deterministic account usually omits is the question of why academics under the same structured circumstances do not respond in a uniform fashion, considering their general assumption that personal values and concerns are of secondary importance or irrelevant. Archer (2007: 6) is particularly critical of what she terms 'social hydraulics' - the conceptualisation of social forces as 'pushes' and 'pulls' where ‘no resources need be made to any aspect of human subjectivity in order to explain social action’. This is not to discount the reality that many academics make decisions strongly influenced by their

understanding of the broader socio-economic landscape. However, the admission of individual authority is a necessary stepping-stone for avoiding such 'social hydraulics' and asserting instead that it is the personal deliberations about the structural context in which one finds oneself that determine one's courses of action.

3.2. Agency-oriented explanations of academic careers

In discussions of the academic profession, individual agency has received increasing emphasis in recent years, even though as Ashwin (2008) and O'Meara (2012) point out, such discussions comparatively still remain much fewer in number compared to structure-oriented studies, as well as to studies investigating the agency of other higher education constituents, such as student and university managers/administrators.[2] In this context, the exploration of academics' agency remains a relatively young phenomenon, in terms of defining, understanding, and using the concept (Kahn 2009a; Campbell and O'Meara 2014). If one tracks publications foregrounding the concept of agency, they seem to peak in the late 2000s' and early 2010s, and the term did not play a prominent role in higher education research until then. According to Campbell and O'Meara (2014), one of the symptoms of the newness of the application of agency to academic careers is that it is often loosely and ambiguously defined, if defined at all, in many of the studies that examine this contrast.

The interest in academics' agency, at least in the first instance, has emerged in response to - or more precisely, as a critique of - the much more prevalent structural stance common in studies of academic careers. In other words, it was introduced as a counter narrative to earlier and

[2] Ashwin (2008), nevertheless, makes clear that it remains difficult to assume precisely which population is most fully explored regarding the exploration of individual agency.

highly deterministic sociological views of academic careers, and as a way of turning from system to subject-centered views. This has been undertaken on the grounds that structural views have largely neglected the active role of the individual academic and her/his ability to act purposefully and intentionally in achieving the goals that matter to oneself. Diverging away from mainstream research in this area, these studies in essence argue that researchers of academic careers need to be more mindful of the agentive powers that individuals hold in navigating their careers (e.g. Clegg 2005; Kahn 2009; Gonzales 2012; McAlpine and Amundsen 2016). In response, authors have begun to cast light on new and important understandings of academics' experiences by choosing to frame their focus around 'subjective' rather than 'objective' careers (Arthur et al. 2005). This has resulted in a partial shift of balance between structure and agency, in favour of agency.

In the following subsection, I turn my attention to studies of academic careers that seek to emphasise the agent's point of view, and ultimately to counter the arguments found in structure-oriented studies. While these studies offer a fresh perspective on academics' capacity to be intentional and self-guided in their choices and actions, in my view they have not fully succeeded in offering a comprehensive account that brings together different aspects that influence academics' lived experiences. In particular, the most common deficiency of these studies is the failure to acknowledge and sufficiently account for the structural context in which agency takes place; often resulting in a disembedded, voluntarist and romanticised view of agency that ignores or severely undermines the structural conditions that create opportunities and limitations to academics' choices. In this respect, even though this body of work has offered significant indications towards clarifying the way in which agency works for academics, it remains insufficient in explaining the relation between structure and agency.

Methodological and conceptual framings of agency

In studies of academics' agency, individual stories are often depicted in evocative narratives, allowing the reader to think about, and dig deep into, the personal stories and idiosyncratic testimonies of academics that are often passed in silence within structural studies. The usual focus is on personal meaning, intrinsic interests and other attributes that relate to personal experience, in a way that I believe is refreshingly willing to consider emotions and feelings. In this sense, work in this area serves as a helpful corrective to overly abstract generalisations about global trends regarding academic careers.

In taking up the challenge of providing a closer look at academics' experiences, agency-focused studies, almost without exception, have tended to rely on qualitative data, generally derived from interviews, and including methodologies such as phenomenology, narrative and ethnography. In practical terms, this usually involves working empirically with a small and purposefully-selected sample of individuals to explore particular aspects of agency. An exception to this can be found in Campbell and O'Meara (2014) who, to my knowledge, remain unique in investigating academics' agency using the quantitative survey methods common in structural-oriented studies.

Conceptually speaking, agency literature draws quite broadly on modern theories of subjectivity and on theories connected with methodological individualism (Trowler and Knight 2000), which may explain why so many studies of agency in higher education focus on the agency of individuals, and not the collective. Collective agency has rarely been an interest of research, perhaps out of a fear of losing sight of the 'first person' recently reclaimed from structuralist and functionalist views. While an explicitly structure-focused theoretical

proposition is difficult to locate in studies of higher education, the scholarly work on agency is evidently more theoretically coherent; even though as O'Meara (2012) notes, many of the agency studies to date are in need of a much tighter coupling between theory and empirical research findings. Solem and Foote (2004) offer a slightly more critical view by stating that this literature is largely divorced from theory, though acknowledging that it, nevertheless, provides a good amount of practical advice for academics in managing their careers.

Drawing from suggestions found in social theory, it can be argued that the work on agency in higher education falls short of a fully articulated theorisation due to its inability to incorporate broader structural factors into the agency debate (an issue to which I return later in this and subsequent sections). In other words, relying on agency theory alone risks reducing social life to the micro-realm of human subjective experience, denying the existence of events which are not simply behavioural (Layder 1997). This closely resembles Apple's (1979: 140) critique of phenomenology as it 'inclines us to forget that there are objective institutions and structures 'out there' that have power, that control our lives and our perception'. Clegg (2005), in part, acknowledges some of these shortcomings when the problem of agency is theorised in discussions of academic careers; yet, she still finds it more sensible to rely on theoretical underpinnings that explicitly theorise agency, rather than following structural accounts that deny it.

The fairly strict focus on individual agency has obvious implications for the definitions used in these studies. In a significant portion of research, the definition of agency is simply operationalised as individual choice, or human action in more general terms. This is quite different from the broader sociological literature on agency where the term is frequently defined in relation to structures (King 2010). In this respect, existing constructs of agency are unhelpful

in exploring the interaction between structure and agency. Taken together, the existing definitions of agency appear to fall into two broad categories as regards to how agency is measured: namely, some studies focus only on intentionality, while others focus on both intentionality and action. In the first instance, it is implied that having strategic goals is the only necessary condition for agentic behaviour. As Neumann et al. (2006) underline, agency here relates to the way of thinking, the agentic process of meaning-making and the reflection upon it. In the second instance, definitions go further in arguing that it would not be enough for academics to simply form intentions in order to be called agentic. Scholars who subscribe to such definitions insist that in addition to the capacity to make choices, one needs to act upon choices in order to be engaged in an agentic process. An example of this is found in the work of Campbell and O'Meara (2014), whose study distinguishes between agency as a strategic action (any act undertaken in pursuit of a specific goal), and agency as a strategic perspective (the extent to which one's intentions can be viewed as within grasp).

What does research on academics' agency tell us?

Turning to the findings of studies conducted on agency, what becomes immediately evident is that most writings on the topic concern the life of academics in their early career stage (e.g. Solem and Foote 2004; O'Meara et al. 2008**;** Kahn 2009; McAlpine and Åkerlind 2010; McAlpine and Amundsen 2011; Gonzales 2012; Sutherland and Taylor 2011; Sutherland 2015; Acker and Webber 2017); and much less so for subsequent career stages (e.g. Bracken and Allen 2009; O'Meara and Campbell 2011; Terosky et al. 2014).

In spite of its recentness, the available literature on academics' agency covers a diverse range of topics. Existing contributions on the construct of agency within academia include studies

focusing on: professional growth and learning (Daly and Dee 2009; O'Meara et. al. 2008 Terosky and Neumann 2008; L. Archer 2008b); academic duties (Kahn 2009; McAlpine and Turner 2012); success and career advancement (Neumann and Pereira 2009; Sutherland 2015); networking (Terosky and O'Meara 2011); decisions about work (O'Meara and Campbell 2011); identity formation and management of careers (Clegg 2005; Neumann et al. 2006; Kahn 2009; McAlpine and Åkerlind 2010; Gonzales 2012); self-belief and self-awareness (O'Meara et al. 2011); and faculty of colour (Baez 2000).

Taken together, the advancement of agency in this body of work has allowed for a more intricate understanding of academic careers, via a particular humanist and emancipatory discourse where the 'real person' is at the heart of investigation. This narrative promotes the idea that the individual academic should be seen as a central player taking a hand in her/his own shaping as a scholar. Regardless of their varying focuses of inquiry, studies of agency have all aimed to put forward the basic argument that behind the social order there are human beings who think, make meaning out of their experiences and act strategically.

Unlike structural accounts which accentuate an inherent pessimism concerning the academic profession, in which academics and their intentional experiences seem dissolved, accounts which emphasise agency offer a more positive and optimistic outlook; or at the very least, portray academics as working strategically through challenges with almost unusual diligence and persistence. In fact, the exercise of agency in academia has typically been described quite affirmatively and its potential has commonly been associated with creativity, increased self-esteem, well-being, and even happiness. Moreover, it has also been seen as closely connected to the individual's autonomy and empowerment, acting together as forces of self-fulfilment. In summary, what this literature clearly suggests is that higher education would be better off with

greater degrees of agency being exhibited by academics, and accentuates a belief that the removal of the sense of agency negatively affects practice.

While I am mostly sympathetic to this view**,** it is important to note, however, that academics' exercise of agency should not simply be framed in a positive light, nor does it always lead to positive outcomes. Absent from the predominant 'all good' agency discourse in the existing studies are the manifestations of agency that may surface as less progressive or less reflexive acts. This is in part because most agency-focused studies place emphasis on describing human action itself, rather than seeing the (unintended) consequences and events that follow from the interplay with structures (O'Meara 2012). Only a few studies point out that agentive actions can be fallible, undesirable, or just plain wrong, as academics can misdiagnose the situation or misinterpret where their interest lies and hence misjudge their courses of action. The findings of McAlpine's (2012) study on the experience of ECAs with work-related relocations make clear that instances of agentic actions of relocating are not readily-evident as steps toward an upward career progression, or necessarily a reflection of a positive choice, as 'academic relocation often had personal repercussions…and emotional impact' (McAlpine 2012: 187).

Furthermore, as Acker and Weber (2017) note in their study of ECAs in the Canadian workplace, and I would agree, the exercise of agency is often exhibited in ways that complicate triumphalist notions of agency. Or, as Baez (2000: 384) further argues, 'any elaboration of a notion of agency...must recognise that faculty 'choices' are not easy to make, and many faculty members do not always make the 'right' choices'. In other words, it would be naive to explore agency only in terms of the benefits it leads to, while denying that it can also bear negative consequences, which can help in understanding the price of certain agentic choices. Therefore,

agency should be viewed critically, in terms of the subjectivities that direct their purposes and outcomes (Archer 2000; 2003).

The literature points to a number of different and creative ways in which academics can and do exercise agency. In her longitudinal study on ECAs in two universities in the UK, McAlpine (2012) cites instances where participants strategically sought relocation for a number of different reasons. Kligyte's (2011) study emphasises the ability of academics to find time and critically reflect on their practice. By examining the role of individual agency in personal growth as an academic teacher, she concluded that the participants' growing awareness of themselves helped them exercise their agency and enabled them to re-imagine their teaching practice as something that can be changed or developed, rather than something that is beyond their control. McAlpine et al.'s (2010) findings show that developing strong agentic resources - such as self-reflection, self-organisation, self-awareness and proactivity - were critical success strategies for ECAs. Another example is O'Meara et al.'s (2008) study which suggests that those academics who believe themselves to have a high locus of internal control over the ways in which their careers develop are more inclined to being agentic. What these few examples show is that there might be more than one kind of agency, and this is something which I believe higher education scholars should take greater interest in. Yet, what has not always been evident in academic career studies that describe the ways of being agentic is that agency is domain-specific (Archer 2003). In other words, a recognition that academics are not equally agentic in all contexts and that in certain situations some academics have more agency than others (Neumann and Pereira 2009).

Agency-oriented studies of academic careers often suggest that the context in which academic careers unfold is increasingly driven by individuals exerting active influence in choosing and

constructing their careers, whereas the importance of structural influences, such as the organisation or the labour market, are weakening (Enders and Kaulisch 2006). Such a stance is most explicit in studies which assert that academic careers are an archetypical example of the so-called 'boundaryless career' concept (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Arthur et al. 2005), which suggests that individuals have the freedom to create careers that are no longer bound by any predetermined pattern or structural context. In this respect, proponents of academic careers becoming boundaryless (e.g. Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Harley et al. 2004; Enders and Kaulisch 2006; Reybold and Alamia 2008) accentuate observations of individual academics managing their career paths based mainly on their free choice and their personal assessment of any goal they seek to fulfil. Along the same lines, it is further argued that academics are becoming increasingly mobile, implying weakened ties between academics and their institutions of employment.

Thinking of academic careers in this way, however, is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the increasingly popular ‘boundaryless’ rhetoric makes agency quite demanding since it places a strong, and often excessive, emphasis on individuals’ capacity to use power, which in cases of failure may push academics to ascribe it to themselves (e.g., due to their low academic ability or lack of personal skills), rather than to factors outside of their control. In other words, a strictly agentic perspective can lead academics to blame themselves for the difficulties encountered, rather than the structural context in which they find themselves. In the broader literature, Pringle and Mallon (2003) argue that the shift towards boundaryless careers enables organisations to transfer the insecurity to the worker and increase the pressure on the individual. As a result, academics tend to be held personally responsible for career failure, posing a great risk of isolation and disillusionment with the academic career as emphasised in much recent work (Bazeley 2003; Akerlind 2005; Jazvac-Martek et al. 2011).

Second, within critical circles, it is argued that this tendency to think of an academic career as being boundaryless is not well substantiated with clear and compelling evidence supporting such a conclusion, and even less so regarding the argument that it is becoming the predominant way of career formation (Dany et al. 2011). Despite this recent tendency to think of an academic career as boundaryless, recent research has shown that not every career in academia is boundaryless. For instance, Dowd and Kaplan (2005) suggest a typology that reports on experiences of both boundaryless and bounded academic careers, while Henkel's (2004) and Musselin's (2005; 2007) findings confirm that the degree of career choice and control available to academics differs widely within and across national contexts. Others (Dany et al. 2011) have indicated that, even in settings where one might expect boundaryless careers to have become dominant, substantial numbers of academics are still having organisational careers. According to Sutherland (2015), even among those academics often labelled as 'star academics' with ample scientific and academic capital, the boundaryless career is more likely to be an idealised picture than a reflection of reality.

Other scholars go further than merely stressing the diversity of academic careers with regard to their boundarylessness, finding that academic careers are in some ways becoming even more bounded. According to Feldman and Ng (2007), the structured way in which promotions systems such as tenure work, the specific national requirements attached to academic careers, and other normative pressures, do not correspond to the idea of the 'self-guided' and 'freely configured' career conveyed by the boundaryless career model. In this respect, the very fact that academic careers can cross organisational boundaries, or that academics can exercise agency in building their careers, does not necessarily liberate academic careers from environmental influences or from the creation of new boundaries - which are supposedly becoming increasingly weakened, as some agency scholars claim.

With this in mind, it can be argued that the agency literature has not found ways to appropriately accommodate structural issues into their research agenda, much in the same way that strictly structuralist views of academic careers are not convincing either. In this respect, the question of how structures relate to individual behaviour becomes a fundamental problem for these studies, and remains under investigated. Most studies on agency clearly separate the academic (i.e. the agent) from her/his context (i.e. the structure), with the result that the interactional influence if both factors is completely left out of the picture, or at best simplified. As Musselin (2007) states, most of these studies are either completely a-contextual or show a severely limited interest in exploring the different contexts of the agents under study. Moreover, she claims that they often neglect the potential effects of the local institutional culture and/or the national higher education policies on academic careers. In this respect, scholarly accounts rip the individual academic out of the context of politics and policy, and present their practices as though they were the simple realisation of a set of idealistic aspirations. Put differently, these studies have sometimes taken agency and its powers for granted, whereas I would argue that a careful examination of the structural landscape would have been a necessary addition for the purposes of presenting the full picture (I return to this argument in the next section). This is for the reason that such examinations would potentially be able to reveal, among other things, that the structures concerned may indeed have some of the powers that have been claimed by structuralists.

Hence, it is important to note that the ability, or perhaps the range of agency, that one can mobilise is constrained and enabled by various structural factors (O'Meara and Campbell 2011; Gonzales 2014). Studies such as that of Baez (2000), who addresses the issue of race, go some distance in accounting for the importance of structures; even though, in ways similar to other

research on agency, structures are considered only to be of secondary importance. The prevailing (modernist) trope is that agency can fuel structural change and challenge institutional norms and narratives that maintain the status quo. While this progressive representation of emancipatory politics underwriting such accounts of agency holds true in many cases, it also appears that there is an element of romanticising resistance to structures or the capacity to overturn them: overplaying agency as a result. As Gonzales (2014: 198) rightly explains, 'studies of agency in higher education present the risk of displaying actors as heroic characters or gifted and calculated entrepreneurs'. Archer (2000; 2003) remarks that structural influences should not be negated when examining individuals, as there may be barriers that no amount of individual agency can overcome; thereby highlighting the power of certain kinds of constraints that have limited opportunities to act with agency. This, she argues, is necessary to avoid a situation where 'the systematic underplaying of constraints artificially inflates the degrees of agency' (Archer 1982: 467).

3.3. Explanations of academic careers considering the interplay between structure and agency

The available literature on academic careers has rarely considered studying both structure and agency as integral components which together shape and form academics' decision-making. There are, however, several noteworthy studies that have recently looked more critically at the relational interdependence of structure and agency, even though the researchers themselves may not have explicitly articulated it as such. In fact, whilst there are some notable exceptions to this (which I discuss below), none explicitly discuss what it means to attempt to account for both structure and agency in researching academic careers. This is quite unfortunate considering that the relationship between structure and agency raises some fundamental analytical, conceptual, and methodological issues for research into higher education (Ashwin 2008), and

potentially offers a framework for considering how academics negotiate through the contested space of contemporary universities (Mathieson 2011). Nevertheless, these studies do provide an important (although often implicit) indication of the sort of issues that underlie the structure-agency debate.

A number of career-oriented studies have explored the concurrence of structure and agency by linking the availability of alternatives (signifying the structural reality) and the personal acts of preference (signifying the exercise of personal agency) of academics. For instance, influenced by the theory of decision-making around careers advocated by Hodkinson and Sparkers (1997), McAlpine and Emmioğlu (2015) have explored how ECAs at various stages navigate their career decision-making based on the interaction between 'opportunity structures' and 'horizons for action'. The first construct, opportunity structures, is defined as representing 'what is understood by an individual to be the career possibilities, including organisational hierarchies, workplace networks, intra- and inter-organisational mobility.' Horizons for action, the second construct, 'represent the degrees of freedom emerging from personal circumstance that are brought to bear in thinking about career opportunity structures' (McAlpine and Emmioğlu 2015: 1771). By utilising the interpretative value of these two constructs to explain their longitudinal findings, the authors suggest that ECAs' knowledge and understanding of opportunities grew with experience. In contrast, personal horizons for action became narrower due to changing personal circumstances, intentions and responsibilities, as well as owing to their perception of the economic market and the perceived scarcity of jobs available, which discouraged their pursuit of an alternative future. Moreover, even though ECAs' knowledge of opportunity structures was incomplete and changing, it nevertheless provided the context within which individuals framed their horizons of action. In this respect, the question of how

individuals understood the structures that enhanced or diminished their career opportunities was closely related to their ways of acting (McAlpine and Emmioğlu 2015).

In a similar line of argument, McAlpine and Turner (2012) suggested that over time and with growing experience, ECAs moved from a rather naïve and abstract view of academic work to a more robust understanding of opportunity structures in imagining their futures. They became more aware of the advantages and constraints of academic work and how they influenced their academic and personal intentions. In this respect, the link between the intentions and the increased work experience can be understood as 'exercising agency within an increasing awareness of structural constraints' (McAlpine and Turner 2012: 545). Another example of research that combines structure and agency in terms of academics' career decision-making is Lindholm's (2003) work which illustrates how different aspects of both personal preferences and the character of the institutional environment operated together to shape decisions over whether to pursue an academic career.

The interdependent nature of structure and agency has also been encapsulated in several studies of academic success. Using career theory as a guide has commonly been attempted by looking at the relationship between the subjective understanding of success (i.e., reflecting the individual's own sense-making around career success), and the objective understanding of success (i.e., reflecting the institutional career criteria and the formal structures of posts, statuses and positions on the career ladder). Initially, what this body of work notes is that 'success in academia is a slippery concept' (Sutherland et al. 2013: v), inevitably tainted by the challenge of defining on whose terms we perceive success and what constitutes success in any given context. In particular, what has been suggested is that the varying understandings of success have often resulted in conflicting personal and institutional expectations. For example,

research conducted by Sutherland et al. (2013) sought to identify how ECAs in New Zealand universities constructed their subjective notions of success. They found that participants described success primarily in connection with broader life satisfaction, followed closely by having freedom to choose their direction, tasks and duties, as well as having influence on students and impact on society more broadly - despite the fact that these aspects were of little significance in the appraisal and promotion system of their institutions. In her study of younger academics' construction of authenticity, success and professional identity, L. Archer (2008b: 397) reached a similar conclusion that 'none of the younger academics defined success in careerist or instrumental terms', but rather they alluded to notions of self-fulfilment, enjoyment and autonomy. The consequence of this discrepancy may lead to ECAs choosing to leave academia, particularly in cases where they perceive themselves as successful but are not being recognised or validated by their institutions in the same way (McAlpine and Turner 2012).

In a broader but related context extending beyond conflicting interpretation of success, others have provided evidence of the complex interplay of structure and agency by examining the degree to which the person and organisation fit each other – which Lindholm (2003: 128), within the academic setting, defines as the 'congruency between the values, interests, needs, and abilities of an individual and corresponding characteristics of the organisation within which he or she works'. What most of these studies show is that a supportive or hostile institutional work environment can either incentivise or reduce academics' sense of agency. For instance, in a study examining which departmental factors influenced academics' agency, Campbell and O'Meara (2014) concluded that certain departmental contexts, such as the work-life balance climate, personal-departmental fit, and professional development resources, do matter and have particular influence on academics' career agency. In particular, their findings showed that in cases of a significant conflict between personal work preferences and institutional

requirements, individuals felt discouraged to act agentively, and were more prone to withdraw from that workplace. Similarly, in a study examining the contexts for teaching and the exercise of agency, Kahn (2009) found that in cases when participants identified dissonances between their teaching philosophies and practices in their departments, it was often difficult for them to manage and act upon these contradictions effectively. Mathieson (2011) makes a different case in arguing that the contradictions between one's own expectations and those of the institution can enhance academics' sense of agency and can empower them to become critical change agents, rather than simply forcing them to limit their agency and adapt to the status quo. These examples therefore strongly reflect the different ways in which the contradictions experienced by academics can either empower them to change their environment or destabilise their values and practices.

In connection with the descriptions of structures, the existing interplay literature in large part has built on an all-too-negative view of structures which are, almost without exception, seen as impeding or constraining individuals and their choices, rather than enabling or facilitating the possibility of agency. Such a view however seems inadequate, as structures can also clearly support, strengthen and intensify the exercise of agency (Archer 2000). Regarded in this way, aside from, or in addition to, limiting agency, structures can also serve as resources that can help individuals decide on the steps to take and behaviours to adopt (Giddens 1984; Archer 2000). A final weakness of the existing literature on the interplay between structure and agency is its almost-exclusive focus on structures arising from the institutional context, thereby disregarding other types of structural influences. In other words, understanding and exploration of other aspects of the structural landscape has been undertaken far less, if at all. For instance, there is very little research on how structural elements of the broader environment – such as

societal norms, political and economic forces, cultural customs and historical processes - influence academics' thinking about careers and everyday practice.

In summary, what is evident from these studies is that they offer a much more nuanced picture of the relationship between structure and agency, which has been missing in a significant number of studies contemplating academic life. Moreover, what these studies demonstrate is that looking at both structure and agency at the same time is not only possible, but also enriching concerning debates on the academic profession. It is worth noting, however, that these studies of interplay are still perhaps more concerned with situating agents relative to structures than with situating structures relative to agents. Another weakness, with some notable exceptions (McAlpine and Turner 2012; McAlpine and Emmioğlu 2015), is that they provide limited insight on how the interplay between structure and agency is influenced by, and situated within, the flow of time. Relatedly, limited insight is offered into how both structures and agency are transformed as a result of their interplay.

4. A consideration of Archer's exploration of structure and agency

As is evident from the discussion in the previous section, there are two dominant ways of looking at the experience of academics within existing research: either from a structural or an agentic perspective. In the first and more common perspective, the primary attention has been on the varied structural forces impacting on academic careers. These accounts of structures, however, have often downplayed or completely ignored academics' own agency. Conversely, the second dominant perspective has primarily been concerned with the agency of academics, placing the conscious and rational academic at the centre; however, these studies show a tendency of falling back onto an opposite, mono-causal account, due to their failure to appropriately acknowledge and engage with the structural contexts in order to understand

spaces for agency. In this respect, whether or not one takes a deterministic or voluntarist approach, one outcome of these two dominant perspectives has been the same: they both remain incomplete and unsatisfactory. In addition, several recent studies have attempted to engage with the interplay of structure and agency, but this literature on the whole remains limited; and this literature, as explained above, is still in an early form of development and has its own flows.

Some of these limitations I believe can be addressed with the help of the arguments developed by Margaret Archer, that are explored in the following subsections. I start by outlining her research trajectory into the structure-agency debate, after which I introduce some of the key arguments she has provided in her social realist approach. Finally, I consider studies within higher education literature that have relied upon her work.

A brief outline of Archer's research into the problem of structure and agency

Over the last twenty years, Margaret Archer's research has been devoted to the problem of structure and agency, and her work has played a leading role in the sociological analysis of the relation between structure and agency. In ways similar to others (e.g. Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984), she has identified the exploration of the relationship between structure and agency as the most pressing contemporary sociological challenge and 'the central issue of social theory' (Archer 2000: 17). In a recent interview (conducted by Cale and Roll [2015: 166]) from 2015 for *disColsure: A Journal of Social Theory*, she convincingly argues that 'there is no good sociological explanation that doesn't make reference to structure and agency'.

Archer mainly elaborates on the interplay between structure and agency in a trilogy of books, popularly called 'the Archers'. In *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000), the most personal of the three books, she conceptualises how structures impinge on agents, namely by analysing how the situations in which agents find themselves can mean that they have the capacity to operate, *inter alia*, as both constraints and enablements. What she also underlines is that these structural influences themselves require activation by agents. However, what remains unexplored in this book is how agents, by virtue of their powers of reflexivity, deliberate on their social circumstances in relation to their personal concerns (Archer 2003). That is, the process through which structure is mediated by agency. In her second book, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (2003), she ventures this 'how' question with reference to 'internal conversations', through interviewing subjects from all walks of life about their life histories, constraints and enablements, according to their own descriptions. Here Archer not only adds more clarity and consistency to her theoretical writing, but also demonstrates admirable analytical and narrative skills in accord with Bhaskar's (1979) critique of empiricism and positivism. In *Making our way through the World: Human reflexivity and Social Mobility* (2007) she goes on to focus further on the dominant modes of reflexivity based on her previous book.

Archer's theorising of the interplay between structure and agency

Archer has developed her account of the interplay between structure and agency as a response to theoretical explanations that either see humans as overly autonomous beings, or as social vessels lacking distinct agential properties. In her attempt to transcend the traditional structure-agency dichotomy, Archer devotes special attention to linking structure and agency without incurring the risk of reductionism and conflation. Important to her account is her consideration of structure and agency as distinct entities. In this, she distinguishes herself particularly from

Bourdieu's (1977) and Gidden's (1984) structurationism. Although, like Giddens and Bourdieu, she recognises the interdependent character of their relationship, she argues against the mutual constitution of structure and agency, as she believes this hinders the analysis of their interplay. In this respect, Archer highlights that structure and agency are different from and irreducible to each other, because they have different 'emergent properties', as 'both humanity and society have their sui generis properties' (Archer 2000: 17). However, she clearly acknowledges that individuals exercise agency in a social context. This means that individuals require not only self-understanding, but also broader social understanding. Thus, she criticises those who argue that human action can be explained without recognition of the structural context.

In asserting the interplay of structure and agency, Archer places conscious reflexive deliberation (i.e. reflexivity) at the heart of her theory. She argues that agents, in all events, continuously engage in reflexive deliberations regardless of the situation, even in what might seem to be the most mundane or routine everyday exercises (e.g. stopping at a traffic light). This means that agents always respond with a degree of intentionality, even though they may not always be equally aware of this intentionality in different situations. This argument offers a clear move away from Bourdieu's habitus, which Archer explicitly rejects on the grounds that it downplays the role of conscious thought, and hence tends towards social determinism. However, as Vogler (2016) suggests, Archer's move towards more extensive consideration of reflexivity also comes with a cost, as it may be interpreted in some circles as a move towards the other end of the spectrum - voluntarism.

As Archer (2003; 2007) emphasises, despite increasing interest in reflexivity, the term has remained under conceptualised and under researched in social theory. Or, as she puts it,

‘reflexivity is like the dead soldier with unknown identity, which despite much admiration, no one attempts to identify’ (Archer 2007: 62). In her own attempt to identify it, Archer conceptualises reflexivity as a mediation process between the internal and the external world, defining it as ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to the (social) context and vice versa’ (Archer 2007: 4). Engagement in such reflexive deliberation, according to Archer, is conducted through what she terms as ‘inner conversations’ (Archer 2003), where the interaction between agency and structure takes place.

A key element of Archer’s proposal is that even though reflexivity is considered to be common to all individuals, different people exercise it differently. Even agents from similar backgrounds or in similar circumstances act in very different ways and develop their own idiosyncrasies and ways of doing things, negotiating between themselves and the structures they find themselves within. Hence, in Archer’s work, the emphasis is firmly on individuals and heterogeneity, but without losing sight of structural powers. The debate on reflexivity in this sense aims to understand why people react differently to similar circumstances. Based on qualitative research (2003) carried out by means of biographical interviews, Archer defines a typology of four modes of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, meta, and fractured. Clearly, not all people fall tidily into any one of these four categories, but Archer’s research suggests that the majority of people fall predominantly into one category at any one time in their life, with a small number of people simultaneously having two dominant modes.

For ‘communicative reflexives’, internal conversations are typically realised through talks with others (e.g. friends, family, parents, colleagues etc) that serve to complete and confirm their internal conversations. Sharing deliberations with others before deciding on a course of action is characteristic of individuals who ‘mistrust their lone internal conversations’ (Archer 2003:

167). Commonly, they experience contextual continuity because they voluntarily choose not to test the constraints or enablements that society offers them. In contrast, 'autonomous reflexives' are decisive, self-assured and base their actions principally on their own internal conversations. Unlike communicative reflexives, they are not afraid to move away from their initial context, and are good at dove-tailing their concerns (Archer 2003). From a more theoretical point of view, they can be regarded as methodological individualists (Vogler 2016). 'Meta-reflexives' critically reflect on their reflections (hence, 'meta'), and practice self-critique for the sake of self-improvement and self-realisation. Driven by a personal mission, they adopt a subversive stance by criticising the environment and problematising the social order instead of normalising or internalising it – hence, refusing the status quo. Finally, next to and in between the communicative, the autonomous and the meta-reflexives, there are also 'fractured reflexives'. These are individuals for whom the reflexive deliberations (i.e. internal conversations) intensify personal distress and disorientation rather than resulting in purposeful action. Their reflexive processes can be temporarily suspended as they are moving from one mode of reflexivity to another, or even impeded all together. In this respect, their internal deliberations do not allow them to deal successfully with their situations, and so they become passive agents at the mercy of their social environment. According to Archer, the life-long internal discussion comes to a provisional closure when the 'self' reaches a consensus about the projected course of action which seems most feasible in the light of given circumstances. In this way, 'internal conversations' effectively integrate subjective projects and perceived objective circumstances towards a workable *modus vivendi, which* can be considered as the living link between structure and agency.

For Archer, another distinctive feature of her approach 'is its recognition of the temporal dimension, through which and in which structure and agency shape one another' (Archer 1995:

92). Her central argument here is that without proper incorporation of time, the problem of structure and agency can never be satisfactorily addressed. She recognises 'the dynamic nature of agency', while also acknowledging the 'contingency of structures' (Archer 1995: 135). In regards to the temporal interplay between structure and agency, Archer notes that structures are temporally prior to agency: they either pre-exist the moment in which the agent draws upon them or, at the very least, exist at the moment the agent draws upon them. In other words, social structures as such stand prior to agentive action. However, once agency has exerted itself, it becomes necessary to study the impact that this has had on structures. What this means is that pre-existing structures affect actions taking place in the present, and as soon as action has taken place, the outcome of this action has to be analysed in relation to structures, in order to determine their reproduction or transformation. Put in these terms, the relation between structure and agency is one of alternation between the conditioning of agents by structure and the elaboration of structure by agents (Archer 2003). Such an approach allows for a recognition of the emergent powers of the agents in ways that give them a role in explanations of how structural systems sustain themselves or change over time, i.e., how they lead to morphostasis (structural reproduction) and morphogenesis (structural elaboration), respectively (Archer 1995: 157). Additionally, it allows us to trace how experiences of contextual (i.e. structural) continuity and discontinuity contribute to the ways in which agents set and prioritise different concerns. Moreover, Archer (2007) importantly underlines that the temporality of structures and agency can be out of sync. What this temporal disjunction entails is that there can be a difference between what agents want, desire and do, and those actions that are actually possible according to existing structural relations.

Reflections on the application of Archer's approach to research on higher education

Clegg (2005: 150) notes that 'critical realist approaches are not as prevalent in higher education research as in some other disciplinary domains'. She observes that many higher education scholars over the years have been drawn to alternative theories such as Bourdieu's or Giddens'. But more recently it seems that this is changing, since Archer's theory is becoming increasingly popular in many areas of higher education research, precisely because her work helps us understand the relationship between the individual and the social, and the implications this interplay has for both.

There are several higher education studies (a few of them in the context of academic careers) that have relied upon Archer's theory or have attempted to operationalise her arguments in empirical research. More specifically, her work has been used to explore: the nature of student learning (Luckett and Luckett 2009; Williams 2012); academics and their identity (Clegg 2005; Clegg 2008; Wheelahan 2007; Kahn et al. 2012; Guzman-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013; McAlpine et al. 2014); pedagogy (Clegg 2010; Connors 2015); teaching (Kahn 2009); decisions to participate in higher education (Kahn 2009b); and assessment (Ashwin 2008).

What becomes immediately evident, even just from reading the titles, is that a large majority of these studies using Archer have been primarily interested in exploring the concept of agency, while structures only enter as incidental modifiers, if discussed at all (e.g. Clegg 2005; Kahn 2009; Luckett and Luckett 2009). This is somewhat ironic in view of the key rationale of Archer's framework that accentuates the importance of looking at the interplay of structure and agency, rather than just agency. In other words, some of these authors, who have been influenced by Archer, have not acted upon a suggestion that lies in the heart of her theoretical

framework: the significance of transcending the dualism between structure and agency by not giving preference to either one of them. In this respect, it is safe to say that Archer's ideas and concepts around agency have been better understood and followed through than those around structure or around the interplay between structure and agency.

There are, however, several exceptions that have heeded Archer's message in providing more balanced space to both structure and agency. In particular, this can be seen in the work presented by Clegg (2010) in the area of pedagogical discourses and practices. Here, drawing on Archer, the author explores the different forms of reflexivity and explores the complex temporalities of personal development planning against the influence of contextual factors such as employability; and in Kahn et al. (2012), who approach the interplay between personal and sociocultural factors by reflecting on academic practice amongst early career academics over time and through social interactions. But, even in these two cases, Archer's work is often discussed only before the introduction of any of the data, and the possibility of using Archer's arguments as a means of interrogating or interpreting the data is to some extent ignored. So again, it seems that it is the gravitas of social realism that is desired, rather than finding an empirical way of working with it.

Even though the mere extension of theories into empirical research does not offer in itself any assurance of clarifications of concepts, as Tight (2004) rightly notes, it seems that asserting Archer's theoretical propositions in the light of empirical research would be beneficial to sharpening our understanding of how the interplay between structure and agency unfolds in practice. Archer (2003: 124), writing about the contribution of theoretical thinking to practice, makes the argument that in order to have any impact, 'theoretical knowledge has to make a detour through applied science or technology in order to demonstrate its worth'. In this regard,

a more complete understanding of the structure-agency debate requires strategies of knitting together information acquired by empirical evidence with broader theoretical arguments.

Others have worked with Archer's theory in tandem with other theories. This was the case with Wheelahan's (2007) study, which attempted to blend activity theory and Archer's realist social theory in order to analyse the relationship between the individual and society, and the implications for pedagogy. While acknowledging that there are some differences between each - in particular, interpreting Archer's theory as under-socialising the individual and activity theory as over-socialising it - Wheelahan argues that there is a strong resonance between the two approaches when seen as complementary, rather than as sufficient on their own. From an Archerian and a broader critical realist vantage point, however, there is a twofold danger with this hybrid approach. The first danger relates to Wheelahan's reading of Archer as underestimating the impact of social structures. While I think this criticism is partly justified, as some of Archer's work can be, and often has been, interpreted as prioritising the individual (largely due to the importance that she attributes to the autonomous self), this does not mean that her propositions should be equated with theorists relying on methodological individualism, as Wheelahan implicitly suggests. In fact, in more or less all her publications, Archer puts forward an explicit criticism of methodological individualism by showing that their argument that all social structures can be attributed to contemporary actors (their knowledge, beliefs and actions) is untenable.

The incompatibility of Archer's social realist theory and activity theory is the second point of danger in Wheelahan's hybrid approach. Archer (2000) and others within the critical realist tradition (see for an overview Outhwaite [1998]) have often criticised activity theory for lacking any robust theory of the individual other than seeing the individual as a societal element.

Moreover, even though both critical realism and activity theory argue that agency can be transformed, where they differ is that the former sees this transformation as the consequence of a relational process, whereas activity theory privileges the social (Outhwaite 1998). For Archer, the problem in reducing the individual purely to a social construct is that it cannot account for the way in which individuals determine what is personally important to them and the way in which they exercise reflexive agency; nor can it account for the way in which social structures are changed in the process (Archer 1995; 2000; 2003).

The treatment of time is yet another difference. Even though there is some resonance between Archer's (1995) 'morphogenetic cycle' and the expansive cycle of activity theory in understanding the creation of new structures on the basis of the old (Wheelahan 2007), as Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 9) explain, 'the critical realist notion of emergence is not invoked by activity theory'. In the final instance, and leaving aside ontological differences between the two theories, which seem difficult, if not impossible to bridge, the bricolage offered by Wheelahan (2007) lacks any empirical grounding that would support her theoretical premise. In sum, it seems encouraging that in recent years an increasing number of authors in the field of higher education have used Archer's realist social theory to explore different aspects of theoretical and analytical concern. Clearly, the majority of the research discussed above uses Archer's argument in an elastic sense, and mainly in order to explore aspects related to agency. At the same time, only a few studies have seriously grappled with the conceptual challenges that Archer sets for examining the interplay of structure and agency. Her arguments are often too easily souvenired as 'intellectual hair spray' without any real engagement with the ideas she puts forward. In other words, researchers that have tried to build on Archer's work have not made the most of it. In a broader case to be made, this limitation relates to Tight's (2004) contention that higher education researchers do not spend enough time engaging with

theoretical concepts and are not sophisticated in their thinking about broader intellectual debates. This is a situation which Teichler (2005) attributes in part to the way in which higher education research is typically focused on objects or themes, rather than on theory. With this in mind, a more sustained method of engagement with Archer's way of thinking, by exposing the interplay between structure and agency, becomes even more important.

5. Conceptual framework: A way forward for exploring the interplay between structure and agency in the context of debates on the academic profession

In the previous sections of this chapter, I considered the overriding discussions and underlying assumptions that have been provided in existing analytical research and theoretical debates on the academic profession. I offered a critique of these discussions with regard to what they emphasise and what they obscure. In this section, my goal is to suggest a new direction for research, a direction which I will follow in the subsequent chapters in framing my discussion of the day-to-day experiences and career trajectories of ECAs in North Macedonia.

My conceptual framework is supported by three ideas, which constitute the foundation of my contribution to the literature on academic careers:

First, and most importantly, an adequate and more nuanced understanding of academic careers must account for the complex and multi-layered interplay between structure and agency, and this interplay must be examined in a particular *context* rather than at a general level. In other words, there is a need to focus on both individual's intentions and on the ways in which these intentions relate to, and are influenced by, various kinds of structures within a particular context.

Secondly, grasping the multifaceted nature of academics' decision-making requires an examination of the complexity that *relationships*, both within and outside of academia, add to interplay between structure and agency. This, I argue, provides a richer illustration of the impact that various interactions have on how academics construct, adjust and evaluate their choices, behaviours and actions on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories.

Thirdly, I argue that a sensible account of academics' decision-making requires a *temporal* situating of the power dynamics of structure and agency. Such an approach allows us to shed new light on the range of temporal dimensions that must be managed and reconciled, as well as the pressures and possibilities created by different, and often contradicting, shifting time scales. The relationship between structure and agency exposes two types of temporalities where structure and agency interplay, requiring closer attention: *career trajectories* and *day-to-day experiences*.

Even though the three aspects of my conceptual framework are presented separately, I view them as synergic and self-reinforcing. In developing my conceptual framework I was helped by and broadly aligned with the arguments put forward by Margaret Archer, which I believe are a useful way in which to think through some of the most pressing problems for theorising and analysing the lives of academics. As Kahn (2009a: 198) notes, 'scope remains for a wider application of this [Archer's] approach in relation to understanding academic practice, as with its development for early career academics'; but this should be done in a way that also works organically and sensitively with the data and the context of the study. In this respect, I should stress that my ultimate goal is not to test Archer's theory, but to show the ways in which her work and related borrowings from social theory can help us in the conceptualisation and

analysis of academic careers. In what follows, I describe in more detail each of the three conceptual elements stated above.

The importance of the interplay between structure and agency

As observed in the earlier sections of this chapter, it is often either structure or agency that predominates as a means of analysing academic careers, and quite often the two concepts have been polarised in existing research. One larger strand of literature has concentrated on observing structures as obstacles and barriers which strip academics from doing their work or being 'agents of learning' (Neumann et al. 2006). This view has contributed to the formation of 'a narrative of constraint' (O'Meara et al. 2008: 155) which often rightly emphasises the ways in which the structures influencing academic careers do not measure up to the expectations of current and prospective academics. Yet, this discourse alone, although important, tends to portray academics in a deterministic and invasive manner, as products of the system around them. As Archer (2000: 2) notes, this approach is a recipe for passivity since it 'dissolves the human being into discursive structures and humankind into a disembodied textualism'; this might lead one to assume that academics (and especially newcomers to the profession) must simply navigate within existing structures instead of influencing and/or remaking them. As Rhoades, Kiyama, McCormick and Quiroz (2008: 215) observe in the higher education context, this literature is more about how to 'make it than how to remake it'. These weaknesses have led to increasing criticism of this line of research. More than two decades ago, Trowler and Knight (1999: 191) called for an end to the 'structural functionalism' approach to examining academic careers, which 'prioritises the overt over the tacit, the corporate over the local, the formal over the naturally occurring, structure over action'.

In response to such calls, a growing number of studies have recently shown interest in exploring the agency of academics. Agency-focused studies have played a significant role in addressing practical questions of personal development, as well as acknowledging the emancipatory needs of academics and the ways that one can work towards the fulfilment of those needs. However, at the same time, they have fallen short of a full understanding of the surrounding structural contours that shape the careers and lives of academics. In other words, they have failed to properly engage with the structural contexts in order to understand spaces for agency. Ignoring the dynamics created by both structure and agency leads to a false impression that academics' behaviour results solely from agency. In fact, what was notable in the above section dedicated to agency-oriented studies was how many of them have assumed conceptual frameworks and understandings that posit academics as fairly untouched by the structural context. By ignoring structures, or avoiding dealing with them, this literature falls short of capturing the messiness and complexity that structures can add to the debate around academics' agency and the ways in which they can enable, limit, construct and shape academics' behaviour. Moreover, by under-emphasising the impact of broader structural factors, this strand of research (in most cases I believe unintentionally) feeds into a perception that the problems confronted by academics are due to individual deficit, rather than processes dictated by various types of structures.

More recently, a small number of studies have tended, I believe much in the right direction, to find a middle ground by looking both at academics' agency and the structures that underlie their experiences. In the same spirit, as a first conceptual point, I see a major potential contribution in engaging in this important conversation when thinking about academic careers, by emphasising the interplay of structure and agency, as both of the dominant approaches discussed above are too thin to allow for an adequate and more nuanced understanding of academic careers. The necessity of continuing this discussion in further research has been

recently acknowledged in several studies. McAlpine and Emmioğlu (2015: 1784) have stated that ‘a realistic conceptualisation of [academics’] career decision-making needs to merge changing individual circumstances with knowledge of shifting structural contexts’. Similarly, Kahn et al. (2012: 869) have suggested ‘there is still a wide scope for analysis of the relations between structure and agency to inform studies into higher education’. Ashwin (2008) has observed that there is still much space left for ‘close-up’ research to explore the relationship between structure and agency, particularly across different contexts that have so far not been examined. Finally, according to Campbell and O'Meara (2014: 58) ‘understanding the interplay of individual identity, social capital, history, organisational context, larger social forces, and individual faculty agency may be at the heart of the faculty agency research agenda moving forward’.

My proposition here is similar: academic careers cannot be fully understood without a consideration of the interplay between structure and agency. In the tradition of Archer (2003), I suggest that academic careers are shaped, reproduced, and transformed not either through social determinism or voluntarism, but in a complex and nuanced dialogue between the individual and the social world. Therefore, in order to overcome the weaknesses of established approaches in devising conceptual and analytical measures for examining academic careers, I argue that an examination of the lives and experiences of academics needs to be seen as a process located in these relations, and looked at in a particular context. Understood in this way, my argument moves away from studies in which structure and agency are seen as opposing forces. In doing so, I hope to delineate a scholarly angle with an emphasis on a more balanced representation between structure and agency as a significant potential aspiration for future research on the academic profession.

In line with Archer's social realist tradition, my premise is that the day-to-day lives and careers of academics are placed in structural contexts that have profound (negative or positive) effects on how academics choose to act. At the same time, structural arrangements are not untouched by academics' agency, even in cases when academics find themselves 'in circumstances that were not our own choosing' (Archer 2003: 133). Through the exercise of agency, structures can be weakened or strengthened, changed or stabilised, reinstated or blurred. I also recognise that academics' choices and decisions are located within a matrix of structural influences (and not simply one) that shift and change over time in much the same way as agency does. These multiple structures in some cases reinforce each other, and in other cases are in competition; thus adding to the inevitable blurriness around choices made by agents (Archer 2003). Moreover, the relative weight of these structural influences is different for different individuals - or as Archer (2007: 19) puts it, these structural factors 'do not produce a uniformity of responses from those similarly situated in relation to them'. This brings me to another important point: agency is idiosyncratic and heterogenic, and entails different ways of experiencing the world. Finally, I recognise that individuals are not equally agentic in all contexts (Archer 2003); that is, in a particular context of action, academics' agency can and does change.

The complexity that relationships and interactions add to interplay between agency and structure in academics' decision-making

Academics (especially those in the early career stage [McAlpine et al. 2014]) do not always have influence over the structures, policies and practices that have a direct bearing on their day-to-day lives and careers. In such situations, they tend to seek 'relational agency' (Burkitt 2015). That is, they engage in creating different relationships and interactions, both within and outside of academe, that can act in their behalf to produce a particular result. This has implications for individual agency because how academics act, the powers they accrue or the constraints upon

them, do not rest on their relation to structure but on the nature of the relationships with others. These relationships and interactions also influence how academics construct, adjust and evaluate their choices, behaviours and actions. This perspective proposes that academics' decision-making can be better understood by the degree of influence that results from interacting with other people - their personal resources, positions and ideas within a particular moment or context of action.

While different sociological theorists (Bandura 2001; Archer 2003) [3] have long incorporated a place for relationships and interactions, much of the existing literature on academic careers positions academics as simply working alone, as opposed to viewing them as parts of larger relationships, communities or networks (McAlpine et al. 2014). As O'Meara et al. (2008) note, focusing solely on the individual has limited our understanding of how ECAs learn, grow and make decisions with or through others – and possibly because of others. Consequently, we know relatively little about the extent and ways in which ECAs actually engage with colleagues and others as they make decisions (Waes et al. 2015). The extent to which individuals are intentional about their interactions and the implications of these interactions for their academic identity are also lacking in previous research. This is despite the fact that relationships and networks have been identified as a critical aspect of professional growth for ECAs (O'Meara et al. 2008). Gardner (2009), for instance, argues that networking can be a valuable source of research confidence for ECAs and can boost their credibility. It can also demonstrate the autonomy of ECAs, reduce isolation and loneliness, and improve academic outcomes (Sutherland and Taylor 2011; Remmik et al. 2011). For these reasons, Trowler and Knight (2000) highlight the need to recognise the importance of the communities that lie between the

3 Bandura(2001) talks about 'proxy agency', while Archer (2003) refers to 'communicative reflexives'.

institution and the individual, as important sites in the acquisition and creation of values and knowledge.

In line with this, a more complete understanding, I argue, requires being sensitive to the different and changing relationships that academics create, participate in, or abandon. In particular, I suggest considering how relationships are formed and for what purpose, the nature of these interactions, the practices of subversion or resistance that underlie them, and the opportunities and challenges that result from them. More specifically, such an approach can make evident the ways in which ECAs in particular are able to seek, build, protect and maintain relationships; the energy required and invested in these relationships; the ways in which they are used by ECAs to move their work forward; or the ways in which ECAs set the boundaries of relationships and manage the degree of interaction. From a structure-agency perspective, exploring ECAs' engagement with others can help us understand how they can strengthen their individual agency in a particular context, much as it can help identify the structural barriers that relationships can pose. Ultimately, I argue this will provide a richer illustration of the complexity that relationships add to interplay between agency and structure in ECAs' decision-making.

The literature on academic careers, and ECAs in particular, is usually centred on a range of relationships within the institutional environment. The most prolific interactions captured by research to date are those between ECAs and their mentors, supervisors and other senior colleagues, despite recent evidence that many ECAs less frequently turn to such people for support (Jazvac-Martek et al. 2011). These studies usually highlight the ways in which these interactions serve to offer ECAs practical and emotional support in their

career and everyday lives . At the same time, they often acknowledge the absence of such support for many academics in the early career stage (Jazvac-Martek et al. 2011).

What is evidently missing in current discussions are the important interactions with other people that happen outside the confines of the organisation, both in the professional and private (i.e. personal) domain. For instance, there is limited insight into how ECAs draw on professional networks beyond their immediate environment to seek advice concerning their daily work and careers; even though as Terosky and O'Meara (2011) note, these networks can be important sources of inspiration for academics at all stages. Moreover, the existing literature only incidentally provides reference to the role of relationships within the private context - including those with family, friends, partners etc. - and how they inform ECAs' decision-making (e.g. Bonetta 2010; McAlpine et al. 2014). Hence, I argue that we must seek to understand the experiences of ECAs in a broader context, taking into account off-campus relationships as significant sources of coping for ECAs. The private context becomes even more important when we consider that ECAs are often not simply following their own careers, but are taking into consideration their partner's career, children's education, proximity to friends and other personal factors (Golde and Dore 2001; McAlpine and Emmiouglu 2014). Bearing the above in mind, I aim to consider how choice-making is embedded in and influenced by a complex set of interactions within and outside of academia.

Temporality

The third aspect of my conceptual framework emphasises the importance of accounting for the temporal dimension of both structure and agency – a perspective laying the foundations potentially for a richer and more dynamic understanding of academics' decision-making. This has been an issue left largely unexplored by previous scholarship. In social theory, Emirbayer

and Mische (1998) and Wyatt (2007) have strongly criticised the lack of a temporal dimension in discussions of structure and agency. The situation is similar within the higher education literature referring to the academe. Ylijoki and Matyla (2003: 56) have pointed out that 'the temporal dimensions have been lacking in research on academic work', even though academic life is deeply embedded in the passage of time (Clegg 2005; Felt 2009). Similarly, O'Meara and Campbell (2014: 58) point out that 'rarely have studies [in the field of higher education] explicitly looked at faculty decision-making as temporal – that is, as influenced simultaneously by a sense of past experiences, current circumstances, and projections of future'.

My initial point of departure is that the agential perspectives and actions of academics can only be captured in their full complexity if they are analytically situated within the flow of time. Even though the agency of academics unfolds in time 'rather than through some static or detached perspective that avoids recourse to human subjectivity' (Kahn 2009: 205), for the most part examination of their agency has remained detached from time, or at best situated in the present (Clegg 2010). A full understanding of their agency therefore requires a wider framework that is also mindful of academics' experiences of the past and their ways of seeing and imagining the future. But, while I suggest that the past, the present and the future are connected, they are not always in harmony.

Furthermore, and fundamentally, temporal elaborations must account for the influence yielded by social structures. Yet, as Baez (2000: 384) notes, the existing literature explaining the challenges faced by academics 'fails to account for the temporal nature of social structures'; even though structures, no less than agents, have their history and are constructed over time (Archer 2003). As I have argued earlier, in my critique of structure-oriented studies in the context of academic careers, incorporating a static notion of structures can prevent us from

understanding how academics' agency can subvert the power of structures. As Butler (1997) argues, the recognition of the temporal life of structures is in itself evidence of their vulnerability and susceptibility to change. In other words, structures are not detached and eternal: they are temporal, and they must be continually reinforced by individuals in order to continue their existence (Archer 2003; Butler 1997).

I argue that the temporal interplay between structure and agency in the case of academic careers exposes two types of temporalities where structure and agency are at interplay, requiring closer attention: *day-to-day experience* and *career trajectories*. Regarding the first, my focus is on time as it is experienced and structured in the everyday sense. Here my emphasis is on the plural ways in which everyday time is practiced - spent and saved, used and produced, managed, shaped and accounted for - within the given structural context. The day-to-day aspects of work concern a number of questions: what is daily work all about?; Which commitments and duties are core and fundamental?; What is its purpose?; Who determines its content?; To whom it is directed; and ultimately how it is exercised subjectively? From this perspective, personal time also comes to the fore in reflecting on academics' ability to combine work and other areas of life such as family and leisure. In empirical studies of academic life, personal time is mainly referred to in a negative sense: as something that is lacking and constantly at risk from work obligations. Within this context, time emerges as a significant terrain for struggle regarding work-life balance, and the consequence is a tightening 'time screw' that has become a prominent and pervasive feature in academic work (Ylijoki and Mantyla 2003). The focus on day-to-day activities seems even more relevant in a 'culture of overwork in the academy' (Schuurman 2009: 308).

This perspective will allow me to recognise a range of modes through which the micro-ordering of day-to-day activities takes place, and how these less dramatic, everyday practices shape the behaviour of academics, vital in making sense of the interplay between structure and agency. Research done by McAlpine et al. (2014) suggests that while significant career events and turning points are useful markers to describe the interplay between structure and agency, it is in the day-to-day activities that the relationship between the two surfaces most convincingly. Or as Thorkelson (2012: 4) says about research of academic cultures, 'it's not only about the play of socioeconomic structure, but about the dramatic, poetic, affective play of everyday life'. In that respect, everyday time can be understood both as a product of individual reflexivity and planning, as well as through the lens of the structural order within which academics operate. This last point is evocative of Clegg's (2010) analysis which identifies the tensions between the time of the organisation and the time of academics.

Regarding the second aspect of temporality, *career trajectory*, I take up a different temporal frame. My focus will be on the ongoing production and reproduction of the narrated past, the lived present and the imagined future by individuals, as well as the structures that impact how individuals reflect on their career trajectory through time. That is, the ways in which agentive and structural discourses interact through time. In the existing literature on academic careers, there has been far more emphasis on the ways in which career trajectories are conditioned and demarcated by different contexts and policy discourses (national, institutional, disciplinary and so on): in contrast, the career trajectories imagined by individuals and the heterogenous ways in which their careers play out on the ground - including ruptures, breaks, tensions - has been largely overlooked.

Several studies, however, are notable exceptions worth mentioning here. In the literature on ECAs, McAlpine et al. (2014) offer a rare insight into the temporal embeddedness of agency. Through the conceptual framing of identity as a trajectory, the authors focus on the importance of finding out how ECAs learn, reflect and change over time based on their own positions, circumstances and experiences. More specifically, the notion of 'identity-trajectory' (McAlpine et al. 2014) highlights how distinct past experiences contribute to specific present intentions and imagined futures - but without necessarily conceptualising experience in a linear or undisrupted fashion. In a similar vein, Henkel (2002) views academic identity as a continuum that links the past with the present and the future; whereas L. Archer (2008b) locates present and future intentions of academics as being achieved through an invocation of 'the past'. A strong temporal aspect is also evident in the findings of Jazvac-Martek et al. (2011), who concluded that ECAs in their sample exhibited increasing academic role integration over time. In particular, they found that ECAs moved from a diffused role identity in the early career phase, towards a stronger sense of integration of roles in the middle phase and more fully integrated roles in the later phase. In these terms, the identity of ECAs can be understood as an identity in the making or under construction, particularly in view of the stances put forward by postmodern philosophers who argue that the formation of identity is characterised by indeterminacy, partiality, and complexity (Taylor 2008).

These two temporal dimensions show resemblance to Archer's use of time in her analytical work. There is a clear trajectories-related dimension in Archer's engagement with her study participants, which relates to her view of 'the lifelong story' (Archer 2000: 295) as a sequence which situates agents in relation to their past habits, present judgements, and the future projections and desires of those concerned; either reproducing or transforming structures as a result. Archer (2003) also goes some distance in accounting for the importance of exploring

individuals' day-to-day experiences. She argues that agents practice a 'reflexive' monitoring of their daily activities and interactions even when they go through routine processes, which takes considerable imagination. Moreover, in their everyday life, agents draw on their structural landscape to give meaning to their actions. This implies that it is the everyday performances of practices that determine the extent to which structures are reproduced or altered. Put this way, the activities in daily life can have a profound effect on social conduct more generally - a point which is also echoed in the work of Giddens (1984: 9) who equates agency with the 'lived-through process of everyday conduct'.

6. Context matters: exploration of the Macedonian higher education system

In what follows I first provide an initial indication of how structure and agency are viewed in the higher education literature within the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) context (which I am broadly interested in given my focus on North Macedonia). I do this because it will have some bearing on my argument as regards the question of what a consideration of issues around structure and agency can offer for research of academic careers in the periphery. Then, I turn my attention to considering what the exploration of the interplay of structure and agency in a new context can reveal and why such a study is important. In the next section, I discuss the reasons behind my choice to situate my study in the Macedonian context. This is followed by offering my reasoning for focusing on ECAs as a subject of study. I close this section by outlining the research question guiding my study, also laying down the specific definitions I use of *structure*, *agency*, and their *interplay*.

6.1. Structural convergence between higher education systems in CEE: can we speak of CEE as a distinct region?

As evident by now, structural explanations have been a major focus of research in the context of academic careers internationally. The literature on academic careers and higher education more broadly in the CEE region is no different: it tends to over-privilege the legacy of structural influences. The focus has been largely on explaining structures connected with the governance of higher education and higher education reforms (van de Bunt-Kokhuis 1993; Hufner 1995; Westerheijden and Sorensen 1999; Tomusk 2004; Pausits and Pellert 2007; Dobbins 2011; Zgaga et al. 2013; Galevski 2014c; Vukasović 2014a); the privatisation of higher education (Giesecke 1999; Slantcheva and Levy 2007; Klemenčić and Zgaga 2014); the funding mechanisms (Vukasović et al. 2009; Keszei 2015); internationalisation (Flander and Klemenčić 2014; Dakowska and Harmsen 2015); and the Europeanisation process (Tomusk 2007; Vukasović and Elken 2013; Vukasović 2014b; Kozma et al. 2014; Dolenec et al. 2014).

Notably, however, CEE structural studies suffer from two additional deficiencies. First, these studies have grappled with a much smaller range of structures, and rarely with structural contexts outside the political and policy arena (Stensaker et al. 2014). The predominant attention has been towards the state apparatus as a structure and the structural influence of European initiatives (such as Bologna), which have thus overshadowed other types of formal and informal structures, and their effect. This can be explained in part by the limited number of higher education research studies in the region (Vukasović 2012), and in part because researchers have failed to recognise the importance of a wider range of structures for the analysis of higher education and academic careers in particular. A second weakness relates to the ways in which the analysis of structures has been approached. Most studies provide only a general description of structures, and are focused less on grappling with possible discrepancies

in what structures are claimed or designed to do and how they operate and exert influence in practice.

Regardless of these limitations, there is a considerable consensus in the CEE higher education literature on two key points. First, higher education systems across the region are seen as sharing important structural similarities and to some extent following a particular trajectory of structural development and change over time (Scott 2002; Smolentseva 2003; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Zgaga et al. 2013' Galevski 2014a; Stensaker et al. 2014). In particular, as Scott (2002) and more recently Vukasović (2012) argue, similarities can be found across three distinct periods.

The first period relates to the communist years (c. 1946-1989), when most countries in the CEE region exhibited commonalities under the ideological premises of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, including as a conceptual basis for policies concerning higher education. Heavy state regulation was the most important feature of higher education in CEE during this period, with universities becoming highly politicised and strongly influenced by the idea of building a communist society as a new social order (for example, the teaching of subjects such as Marxism, and the emphasis on concepts such a 'brotherhood' and 'equality') (Giles 1979; Smolentseva 2003; Kuraev 2016).

The beginning of the second period (c. 1990-2000) is usually associated with the collapse of communism from 1989, which resulted in 'a simultaneous transformation' (Offe 1994) of CEE countries - most of them facing dramatic changes in the socio-economic and political environment. These broader developments in society had a forceful impact on developments within higher education. Galloping inflation and wider economic uncertainty entailed a lack of

funding and of adequate maintenance of higher education systems (Vukasović 2012). Under the pressure of other pressing problems, the countries in CEE (re-)established their national higher education systems in the absence of clearly defined goals and long-term strategies, in part due to the lack of familiarity with independent decision-making and the instability of state institutions (Rupnik 1992; Cerych and Hendrichova 1994). In an effort to compensate for the stagnation evident in the previous two decades under communist rule, there was an element of radical and experimental reconstruction of higher education during this period (Scott 2002). While reforms across Western Europe were more incremental and characterised by smaller accumulative adjustments, reforms in most parts of CEE took place within an exceptionally short period of time (e.g. the abrupt de-ideologisation of higher education; the reduction of state influence and increasing autonomy of institutions; the emergence and growth of private universities) (Rupnik 1992; Cerych and Hendrichova 1994; File and Goedegebuure 2003; Kwiek 2007; Zgaga et al. 2013).

Finally, the third phase (c. 2000-onwards) of commonality in the CEE region is directly connected to the Europeanisation process and the Bologna Process in particular, which became a major point of reference and has served as a blueprint for the sector in the CEE region. Several EU member states (e.g., Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria) were original signatories of the Bologna declaration in 1999, while others joined after few years (e.g., Croatia in 2001; North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia and Albania in 2003).

The second point of agreement in the CEE literature appears to be that structures underlying higher education in the CEE context are quite different from structures existing elsewhere, and therefore merit a standalone discussion (Scott 2002; Smolentseva 2003; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Stensaker et al. 2014). It has been argued that higher education and academic life in CEE

have retained a significant degree of idiosyncrasy and are faced with a number of unique challenges when compared to higher education systems in the 'West' (Zgaga et al. 2013; Branković et al. 2014) - to the point of 'representing a distinctive region on the global map' (Liviu 2015: 40) and a 'natural laboratory' for research on theoretical and policy related problems in higher education (Stensaker et al. 2014: 9). Kwiek (2007: 107) has gone further in arguing that 'there is an irreconcilable difference in perspectives between the academic world of affluent western democracies and the chronically underfunded post-communist countries in Central and (South-) Eastern Europe'. In this view, higher education systems in CEE are not only struggling with similar problems to their Western European counterparts, but also face a set of additional challenges due to the unfavourable socioeconomic and political situation over the last several decades, and therefore merit a standalone discussion (File and Goedegebuure 2003; Kwiek 2007; Dobbins and Khachatryan 2015).

6.2. What about agency in the CEE context?

In spite of growing awareness of the importance of agency in the international literature on academic careers, a specific reference to the agency of academics in the post-socialist region of CEE has remained almost entirely absent. To my knowledge, there are no studies that have brought into focus such an inquiry. This is indicative of a wider trend (or perhaps limitation) in the literature on academics' agency, as almost all of it comes from the United States, Canada, Australia, and parts of Western Europe. Geographically, existing studies have quite evidently restricted the exploration of agency to academics located in 'Western' universities. Typically, the examination has been undertaken through an emphasising of the Anglo-American ideal type of a profession - as one which stresses the considerable power of individuals to shape and control their working conditions. Consequently, the contribution and relevance of these texts

beyond the West[4] remains less clear and raises the question of the extent to which existing conceptualisations, findings and conclusions can be said to resemble the experiences and modes of exercising agency by academics in other contexts. This relates to a broader limitation of the social theory literature on agency, where the concept has been mostly explored within individualistic societies in the Western world where a 'can-do' doctrine resonates and is evident in popular culture, unlike in the regions historically/politically considered to be more communitarian 'in spirit', such as the CEE (Alkire 2005).

In the sociological literature focusing on the political, economic and societal developments in the post-socialist space in CEE, very little focus has been placed on agency. According to Oushakine (2013: 287), unlike the post-colonial scholarship in South Asia and much of Africa, where authors have searched for evidence of agency in the colonial order, research focusing on the former socialist bloc in CEE has remained relatively uninterested in 'uncovering sources of agency'. Instead, the literature has largely focused on explaining the political and social shortcomings (particularly in the transition towards democracy since the beginning of the 1990s), which are often attributed to local political elites or external powers. In consequence, as Oushakine (2013) has clearly shown, the existing literature implicitly denies the existence of agency among ordinary people who by and large are presented as passive objects at best, or as entirely dominated by powerful structures at worst. Similarly, Ackermann et al. (2017) note that much research, by both 'Western' and 'Eastern' scholars, addressing the realities within the post-communist bloc of CEE explains human behaviour as one of quietude, obedience, passiveness and non-activity. The elimination of agency in the CEE-focused literature, as

[4] I use the term 'West', "Western' mainly to refer to more affluent countries and regions such as Western Europe, United States, Canada, Australia.

Ackermann et al. (2017) further argue, often occurs because structural constraints are conceptually and analytically treated as fixed and immune to agency, rather than as transitive and altered through agency.

These structure-heavy discourses about the CEE region can be seen as relying on forms of the so-called 'ideologies of Eastness' (Zarycki 2014) that are often combined with the production of an orientalist image of the region, which I argue can serve to (unjustly) reproduce the notion of a ‘civilised and proactive West’ vs a ‘backward and passive East’. In this respect, a focus on agency can serve a broader purpose in challenging established mythologies and folk assumptions about people in the CEE region, in my case within the realm of academia.

6.3. What can the exploration of the interplay between structure and agency in this new context reveal? And why is such a study important?

The earlier outline of the CEE literature provides a good sense why the element of interplay becomes so important. While the broader literature on academic careers has at least looked at both structure and agency in their own rights (though this is in itself problematic), the literature on the CEE region has remained confined to only looking at structure. Consequently we have no understanding of agency or how it interacts with structure in the CEE. As I have argued in previous sections, there are a number of problems that become evident when researchers put one into focus and ignore the other, making a singular approach a worrying position to take. This is why my conceptual framework makes clear that structure and agency have influence on each other, and cannot be adequately understood in isolation. In recognition of this I concur with Kwiek’s (2015: 348) argument that there is a need for ‘more evidence-based knowledge of academic attitudes and behaviours of Central and Eastern European academics, that is, much more work at a micro level of individuals, complementing work at aggregated institutional and

national levels'. In this respect, there is clearly some important reframing and rethinking to be done in further research when examining and conceptualising the life of academics, and I hope my framework will inspire other researchers in CEE, and beyond, to engage in similar work.

Ultimately, in the Macedonian context, such a focus opens up opportunities to reflect on the dynamics of agential interactions with structures. It allows one to think about what is unique to the interplay of structure and agency in North Macedonia, what is present that we already know about from other contexts, and how this new insight contributes to regional and international debates on higher education and debates around using structure and agency to theorise academic careers. My aim is hence to encourage new conversations on the topic, in a context where the interplay between structure and agency has been consistently overlooked, both in the higher education literature and more broadly. Imperative as this is, my study highlights the need to have a more contingent conception of how structure and agency will be related in a particular context.

6.4. Why North Macedonia?

Over the last several decades, the investigation of higher education has become a global topic, and academic careers have attracted growing attention as part of this literature in many parts of the world. While the available literature provides quite a variety of cases, the experience of academics in a number of smaller (and oftentimes younger) peripheral higher education systems is still something of a 'black box'. The Macedonian higher education system seems to be no exception in this regard. With few exceptions, current discussions on higher education and the academic profession in North Macedonia are predominantly based on anecdotal evidence and a few public commentaries by some (often senior) members of the academic community, while

no major theoretical or empirical investigations in the field of higher education in the country exist.

If we use Teichler's typology of higher education researchers, the majority of those who write on higher education in North Macedonia are only 'reflective practitioners' (Teichler 2005: 461). In this respect, higher education research in the country is still more a question of sporadic effort on the part of individuals rather than an organised or comprehensive effort. Unlike other countries in the region (notably Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia), there is no institute, department or educational programme which deals exclusively with higher education research. The absence of serious and systematic investigation of recent higher education developments renders the Macedonian higher education system as one of the most under-researched systems both in the CEE region and Europe as a whole.

Occasionally, the Macedonian higher education system is mentioned 'in passing' as being presumably the same (rather than a similar) system as other countries of the former Yugoslavia or CEE more broadly – thus allowing limited space to capture its idiosyncratic developments over the last three decades since the country's independence. But even when it comes to these comparative studies, as Vukasović (2012) notes in a review of the literature on higher education in the Western Balkans, very few of them have a clear theoretical or conceptual framework and most do not go beyond providing mere descriptions. Thus, as she further notes, 'one of the research challenges is related to the significant lack of qualitative and quantitative data…compared to more consolidated democracies' (Vukasović 2012: 33). This increases further the urgency of conducting higher education research in the region.

Against this backdrop, I grounded my study within the Macedonian higher education context as a peripheral system which has remained insufficiently investigated. In the global and regional context, I hope that such a focus will put the country on the research map, linking it with other higher education systems in transition within the region and with broader discussions of higher education developments elsewhere; ultimately providing a solid basis for further higher education research. In the national context, I hope that the study will offer a profound understanding of the political economy of higher education in North Macedonia, and a particularly diligent insight into the defining features and characteristics of the academic profession in the country, and in particular the experience of academics in their early career stage.

Moreover, I hope that by focusing on the situation in one CEE country, one can learn about the challenges facing higher education peripheries more broadly. I take the Macedonian higher education system as a 'miniature' exemplifying what can be in many cases found across other CEE systems. Still, I concur with Scott (2002), Vukasović (2012) and Zgaga et al. (2013) that any assessment of higher education in the CEE region must carefully avoid the danger of over-emphasising the relative degree of convergence, given the different sizes of the systems, their institutional variety and funding regimes.

6.5. Why ECAs?

There are two main reasons why I have decided to focus on academics in their early career phase. The first reason concerns the broader literature on academic careers. In this literature, 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 and Musselin 2008; Kehm and 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 and 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 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, such as the Macedonian one, remain on the margins of contemporary higher education studies.

In the CEE region, empirical research on the academic profession has been growing in recent years. This literature, while still comparatively small, has covered a range of countries (see for example: Roncevic and Rafajac 2010, Turk and Ledic 2016 [for Croatia]; Galevski 2014a,

2014b [for North Macedonia]; Flander and Klemenčić 2014, Klemenčič and Flander 2015, Klemenčič and Zgaga 2015 [for Slovenia]; Kwiek 2003, 2004, 2014 [for Poland]; Andrushchak and Yudkevich 2012, Yudkevich 2016 [for Russia], Georgieva 2002, Slantcheva 2003 [for Bulgaria]; as well as two special journal issues on the academic profession in the CEE post-communist bloc appearing in: *Higher Education* [vol. 45, issue 4, 2003; and *Higher Education in Russia and Beyond* [vol. 1, issue 2, 2014]).

Yet, the majority of these studies have not been based on any theoretical framework, and their relevance for understanding the experience of ECAs has been relatively limited, as they tend to portray the academic profession as homogenous, neglecting the importance of understanding how academic practice is experienced within different academic sub-groups (such as new lectures, part-timers, ECAs and so on). Such a lack of status differentiation assumes implicitly that academics across academic ranks and roles share a common experience - despite recent calls in the global literature that a distinction between the perception of young and more senior academics might be crucial in understanding and conceptually addressing the contemporary concerns of the profession (Bartelese and Huisman 2000; O'Meara 2012; McAlpine et al. 2014).

The second reason for focusing on ECAs, relates to my first research encounter with the academic profession in North Macedonia. In 2014 I conducted a quantitative-based study (N=487, out of which 112 were ECAs) on the conditions and challenges of the academic profession in North Macedonia (see Galevski [2014a; 2014b]). The questionnaire of the study was broadly based on the European Academic Profession survey (EUROAC) (see Teichler et al. 2013), one of the most extensive comparative quantitative studies on the academic profession in Europe (conducted in over 15 countries in less than a decade). The results of my

Macedonian study revealed that the present state of the academic profession in the country is far from promising and pointed to the fact that academics, particularly those in their early career stage, survive in very difficult circumstances. Some of the major issues confronting ECAs included poor working conditions, inadequate funding, a feeling of a lack of career prospects, over-work and growing uncertainty. For instance, nearly 50% of the ECAs in the sample reported that they did not view their career prospects in academia as particularly promising and reported feeling insecure about their future employment. As much as 70% were very dissatisfied with the working conditions in their institution and 65% were very dissatisfied with their salaries. In order to find out whether ECAs were firmly committed to their choice of career I measured their intentions to make a major job change by (1) seeking a position outside academia or (2) seeking an academic position abroad. On average, 65% of ECAs responded that they had given a thought to the possibility of completely abandoning their academic career and as much as two thirds (63%) responded that they have considered pursuing an academic career abroad.

7. Research question

Most classical and many contemporary accounts of academic life have placed structures at the centre of analyses, and in many ways structures have remained the dominant focus of academic career studies for several decades. These studies, however, have shown very little interest in exploring agency, which has resulted in highly deterministic discussions of academic careers, where any attention to the ways in which academics can exert influence over their lives has been lost.

More recently, agency has emerged as a lens through which academic career research examines the behaviour of academics. However, in many of these studies, the emphasis on agency has

become so central that its importance has been often artificially inflated, and consequently the scholarly attention to the structures that influence academic careers has been severely undermined or entirely ignored. As the concepts of structure and agency have often been understood in antithesis, there has been very little emphasis on the mutual influence between structure and agency in existing studies of academic careers. Therefore, I argue, a more adequate conceptualisation must deal with the interplay between these two power sources.

With this in mind, the present study offers a means to understand the interplay between structure and agency by focusing on the experience of ECAs in North Macedonia, and is concerned with discussing the following key question on the basis of the academic-career and social-theory literature discussed earlier:

Within the contemporary context of Macedonian higher education, how the interplay between specific academic workplace structures and the agency of ECAs unfolds on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories?

For the purpose of clarity, it is useful to offer commentary on the key terms I cover in my research question:

Academic workplace structures. The term academic workplace structures covers a wider assembly of elements - such as, informal and formal rules, policies, resources and practices - within higher education and beyond, expected to constrain or enable ECAs' agency, while also being shaped, reproduced or changed by agency over time.

Agency. The term agency is often defined as doing something (i.e., as requiring action). To me the spectrum of agency also incorporates not doing something for a whole range of reasons. This means that an ECA can have the power of being agentic, but may intentionally decide not to use it. In this respect, my definition of agency, in addition to action, stresses the importance of the agent as a planner, fore-thinking and making intentional choices that do not always result in action. I also recognise that agency should be understood as situated, taking into account the structural landscape which can influence how agents behave. Finally, agency is context specific, influenced by others, and entails temporal variation.

Interplay between structure and agency. As is evident by now, I am inclined to see the connection between structure and agency as a two-way rather than a one-way street – that is, as reciprocal. This means that ECAs' agency can be influenced in expansive and restrictive ways by structures. In turn, structures can be reproduced, but also transformed by ECAs' agency. This conceptualisation echoes that of Archer who also argues that agents must be regarded as 'structurally situated', while acknowledging the 'contingency of structures' (Archer 1995: 135).

Career trajectory. This term is used to mean the entire evolving sequence of a person's work experience and individual biography over time, involving past, present and future intentions.

Day-to-day. This term refers to the daily activities, routines, and time management of ECAs, while accounting for the dynamic and shifting nature of this dimension of time as well.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

In the following subsections, I outline the reasons why particular methodological choices were made and the relevance of these choices for addressing the research question of this study. In particular, I explain who the participants are; why and how they were chosen; how the research was developed and conducted; the way the data was analysed and verified; how results have been presented; and what considerations of ethics and securing anonymity were made.

2. Situating my work methodologically: a qualitative approach

A qualitative research design was selected due to its appropriateness in terms of answering the research question in the specific, but under-researched, context of North Macedonia. Qualitative research also provides richness, local groundedness, holism, and a better focus on lived experiences (Miles and Huberman 1994). In North Macedonia, and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, as a general rule, the importance of these aspects tend to be undermined as positivist designs dominate not just higher education research, but research in general (Vukasović 2012). Studies of academic careers in the region are no exception - they mostly stem from survey-based research that tends to reduce and simplify academics' choice-making and experiences to what is immediately observable and quantifiable. In this respect, a qualitative approach allowed me to 'recognise the heterogeneity of meanings' (Archer 2003: 155). To my knowledge, this is the first extensive and in-depth qualitative study on the academic profession in the countries of the post-communist bloc in CEE.

Several other considerations informed the choice of a qualitative approach for this thesis. I decided to rely on a qualitative approach due to the theoretical and empirical potential it has to offer for documenting lived experiences, and capturing the interplay between structure and agency. On one hand, it naturally aligns well with subjectivity, agency, empowerment of the subject, and exploratory openness (Silverman 2004). At the same time, it can provide an in-depth comprehension of the different structural contexts that shape and matter to the experiences of individuals (Mason 2002).

With the use of a qualitative approach, I also wanted to address shortcomings identified earlier in Chapter 2, in order to avoid the two common extremes observed: namely, privileging either a structural or an agentive perspective. In this respect, a qualitative lens allowed '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: 954).

In the following subsections, I focus in quite concrete terms on the various ways in which a qualitative approach has been integrated into all stages of the research process - in designing the study, collecting and analysing data, and reporting results – and how the study has benefited from relying on such an approach.

3. Participants, selection criteria and recruitment

Early career academics

In choosing ECAs as a primary subject of my study, I aimed to unravel the lives and experiences of those who seemed to face particular challenges and pressures in the Macedonian academic profession based on the conclusions on my previous quantitative work (Galevski 2014).

To examine this main question of my thesis, I recruited 32 ECAs. The participants were selected from across four universities (two public and two private). While generalisation is not what is usually preferred in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman 1994), this study does aim and expect to have some transferability and resonance with what happens in the lives of ECAs in other universities in North Macedonia, and possibly more broadly in the CEE context due to a degree of convergence underlying higher education in the region over the past several decades (Scott 2002; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Vukasović 2012).

The decision to focus on both private and public institutions rested on the perceived growing stratification across the two sectors, in terms of institutional prestige or other attributes arising from the university, which can translate into varied academic career prospects and work aspirations for ECAs.

The selection criteria for participants also referred to the length of experience. A consistent problem underpinning research of ECAs is the lack of a precise and universally agreed definition as to who is an ECA (Bazeley 2003; Åkerlind 2005; Weijden et al. 2016). The fragmentary and dissonant use of the term and the wide diversity of roles and responsibilities covered by the title results from the nature of the early career stage, which is context-dependent and influenced by a variety of national settings in which the definition might need to be applied (Sorcinelli et al. 2007; McAlpine and Åkerlind 2010; Sutherland and Taylor 2011).

So any definition I might propose as appropriate for the Macedonian context must include not only ECAs within several years of having obtained a PhD, but also those in their Doctoral and Master's studies, given that it is during this stage that many are appointed to their first academic

position. In the present study, eligibility was restricted to academics with up to eight years of having been appointed to their first full-time academic position. The decision to rest my operational definition on experience rather than age (e.g. those under 40) was based on the limited appropriateness of age as a criterion, as not all ECAs are necessarily in the same stage of their lives and some of them may have already established long-term relationships and started their own families. 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: 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'.

Participants were recruited through an open call, and through 'snowballing' - namely, in order to identify interested individuals fitting the selection criteria, administrative secretaries[5] from each of the four institutions were asked to distribute a call for participants using their official mode of internal communication (for example, intranet, e-mail etc.). A total of 14 participants responded to the initial call. The remaining 18 participants were recruited through 'snowballing' (Babbie 2012). The initial 14 participants assisted me in starting the snowballing process by nominating other potential participants that meet the selection criteria. At the outset, it should be noted that the referral process used in snowballing may lead to the inclusion of similar participants (Miles and Huberman 1994). However, despite possible selection bias, it was often the case that the stories of those recruited through snowballing were markedly

[5] Note that the term administrative secretaries does not concern university administrators, but rather administrative staff in charge of communications.

different from those who had helped me to identify them in the first place. This offers reassurance that any effects resulting from snowballing are likely to be minimal.

The total number of participants (32) was in line with most qualitative studies where the number of participants is usually fewer than 50, taking into account that larger numbers may be difficult to manage in terms of data collection and analysis (Patton 2015). Saturation was not used as a guiding principle during the data collection as it is not wholly congruent with the principles of qualitative research (Silverman 2004). The point at which data saturation is determined in qualitative research is problematic given that many elements of the participant's story are often idiosyncratic to the individual and as such no data is ever truly saturated (Wray et al. 2007; McAlpine 2016). So instead, I tried to achieve a more or less balanced representation across the four institutions, with 'the objective to make these people as diverse as possible with regard to age, gender and occupational activity' (Archer 2003: 159).

Table 1 Demographic variation within the sample of ECAs

● **Number of participants per institution:** Public University A (8); Public University B (10); Private University A (8); Private University B (6).
● **Discipline and field of work:** Social Sciences (17); STEM (15).
● **Length of employment:** 1-2 years (5); 3-4 years (6); 5-6 years (8); 7-8 years (13).
● **Age range:** 20s-30s (17); 30s-40s (14); 40s-50s (1).
● **Gender:**

Men (15); Women (17).
• **Ethnic origin:** Macedonian (25); Albanian (5); Roma (1); Turkish (1).

ECAs that showed interest in participating in the study were first provided with the Participant Information Sheet, setting out basic information about my research and their role and rights within it. Upon reading it, ECAs were asked to sign a Consent Form to confirm their willingness to take part in the research, and to ensure that they were aware of their rights as interviewees and my obligations as a researcher. They were then asked to complete a Demographic questionnaire (designed to take approximately 15 minutes to complete) (Appendix 1). In addition to its use as a screening tool, the demographic questionnaire was also aimed at providing background information on potential participants ahead of the interview.

University administrators

The fact that higher education in North Macedonia has been seriously under-researched meant that the study can potentially benefit from additional insight in order to detail its features, both positive and negative. I gathered this insight this by interviewing 15 university administrators (UAs) from the same four institutions holding key managerial roles (at University and Faculty level). Given their institutional positionality (as Rector, Vice-Rector, Dean, Vice-Dean, Member of the Senate, and other positions), these interviewees enabled me to provide a richer understanding of the Macedonian higher education landscape and to illustrate some of the key challenges and pressures that institutions were facing from a human resource perspective. I used their views to inform my analysis in Chapter 6.

From the standpoint of answering the thesis research question, their accounts helped to reveal some of the underlying structures of higher education – though enmeshed in their own assumptions, preferences, interests and investments. In this respect, a broader perspective than that of ECAs was sought to help identify the structural forces that can influence ECAs' experiences, but may at the same time be different from or beyond their individual perception. To the best of my knowledge, there is almost no study that has used simultaneously the insights of ECAs and UAs in order to empirically study the academic profession from a qualitative perspective.

UAs were initially approached with an introductory email that set out my research and invited them to take part in the study. E-mail addresses were retrieved from the institutional websites, and potential participants were invited in a hierarchical order. For instance, at the institutional level, requests were first sent to the Rectors of the institutions, and in cases where Rectors were unavailable, invitations were subsequently sent to the Vice-Rectors. The same procedure was followed for the recruitment of participants at the Faculty-level: Deans first, Vice-Deans second, and so on. While most participants were recruited directly, several participants were also recruited through snowballing at the suggestions of those already interviewed.

In each institution, at least one interview was carried out with an administrator involved in the top-level management of the institution (such as Rector, Vice-Rector, Member of the Senate). Furthermore, at least two interviews were conducted with administrator at the faculty level (e.g. Deans or Vice-Deans). The decision to incorporate officials at both the institutional and the faculty level, rather than just one, was also influenced by the increasingly fluid division of power evident in the institutional governing arrangements of universities in North Macedonia (explained previously in Chapter 5).

4. Design of the research protocol

Semi-structured interviews with early career academics

Following the approach prevalent in other studies relying on qualitative research, I decided to employ a semi-structured interview technique for examining the experiences of ECAs. A semi-structured interview technique was necessary to serve the exploratory purposes of this study and to bring unique, as well as richer, oral accounts to surface (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006; Patton 2015). According to Bernard and Ryan (2010: 29), semi-structured interviews allow this as they 'occupy an interesting position along the structured-unstructured continuum'. The flexibility of the semi-structured protocol in the interviewing process is seen as an essential element in qualitative research (Silverman 2004).

For the purpose of answering my research question, the guiding principle during the design phase of the semi-structured interview protocol was to develop questions that would capture the interplay between structure and agency as it unfolds on both the day-to-day basis and over the career trajectories of ECAs. The three elements of my conceptual framework, presented in Chapter 2, were used as a starting point and foundation in this process. This was done because the design of the framework itself focuses on the many features highlighting the interplay between structure and agency.

Within my conceptual framework, as a first point, I signified the importance of balancing structure and agency in order to more fully understand the experiences of academics. Therefore, an inquiry into the interplay between structure and agency was the central part of the design process. This framing was achieved through a combination of questions that provided different

means of understanding ECAs' intentions and actions, on the one hand, and on the other hand a set of questions that focused on finding out whether ECAs could follow their intentions in a sustained fashion with the structural context in mind. This approach enabled me to document and bring to the surface variable and shifting ways of understanding ECAs' experiences, where agency and structure are at interplay.

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. All these elements, besides bringing to the surface 'individual variability' (Archer 2003: 160), also provided an initial indication of several structural features which naturally came into play already at this stage. To capture the interplay with structures from an agency perspective, participants were asked to reflect on what they had done to overcome moments of challenge and how successful they had been in this. Exploring the extent to which ECAs were (or were not) being persistent, committed and resilient often captured the interplay with structure as well.

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. I did this by including, for instance, questions that related to ECAs' understanding of existing policies and practices shaping their workplace and broader lives; the impact of various institutional and national rules and regulations; the scope of flexibility that existing structures provided; the extent to which structures created tensions, constraints, and contradictions; and the extent to which ECAs found

certain goals realistic, achievable, and within reach. It was hoped that the answers to these questions would provide examples of how ECAs' experiences with structures were framed within a particular social or academic context, and how the nature and influence of structures led to experiences of freedom or of difficulty. Structure-oriented questions often enabled a capturing of the patterns of interplay, specifically through follow-up questions raising particular agentive elements. For instance, a structure-oriented question such as 'What, if any, difficulties have you faced this week?' would usually be followed by an agency-oriented one such as 'What did you do to overcome them?', providing me with information concerning their interplay.

A number of questions were included in order to grasp the complexity that relationships can add to the interplay between structure and agency, in light of my second conceptual element. That is, how relationships, within and outside of academia, may compound, modify and re-direct ECAs' decision-making, on both the career-long and day-to-day levels; how relationships are formed and for what purpose; the nature of these interactions; the practices of subversion or resistance that underlie them; the opportunities and challenges that result from them; and finally, how they may serve to enhance ECAs' agency or create dependencies.

The third element of my conceptual framework underlined that temporality also plays a role in capturing interplay, as both structure and agency are constantly in flux (McAlpine and Amundsen 2018). It was therefore important that the design of the interview protocol would allow for making connections between events, and showing the influence of the passage of time. I captured temporality by focusing on day-to-day time and the career trajectories of ECAs. In consideration of these two temporalities, participants were asked to reflect on their past, present and future - intended to capture a chronology of their experience and how it has changed over time.

In particular, thematic questions about day-to-day experience were designed to allow for seeing how everyday events and routines were experienced in the past, if and how they are experienced at the present, and what they may potentially look like in the future. Much in the same way, thematic questions vis-à-vis career trajectories were split in a way that offered space for retrospection on how they had entered academia, their present position, and an elaboration of their hopes for the future. In doing so, I followed the methods of life history, biography and time-line interviewing, accounting for how individuals made sense of events and actions as they unfolded over time (Adriansen 2012; McAlpine 2016).

Capturing temporality is an important element of qualitative research. According to Coulter and Smith (2009: 586), 'without representing the passage of time, an author has no narrative'. What this means is that a qualitative study needs to provide a sense of time to elicit its various effects, but also to keep the reader interested and expectant (Patton 2015). At the same time, there was a certain limit in being able to fully utilise temporality, as data was collected at one point in time, rather than longitudinally. As Archer (2003: 176) explains 'without a longitudinal study, which could monitor such change, reliance has to be placed upon interviewees' reported learning experiences and retrospective accounts of changes in their deliberative process'.

Prior to the start of the data collection, I conducted three pilot interviews with ECAs in order to detect possible weakness in the research protocol and the instruments used. At the same time the purpose of these pilots was to help me get more comfortable with interviewing and probing question before the actual experience. At the end of each interview participants were asked to provide feedback on any ambiguities or problematic/sensitive questions, the adequacy of the themes covered, and the appropriateness of the time engagement expected from participants.

Semi-structured interviews with university administrators

Semi-structured interviews with UAs were aimed at revealing some of the fundamental structures of higher education in North Macedonia that may not be immediately evident from the conversations with ECAs. Interviewing UAs, as an additional source, was clearly appropriate for a study in a changing but unexplored context with very little available data. In this respect, it was obvious that UAs can provide extra substance and meaning to the analysis of governance, institutions, rule- and policy-making, or other procedures in place. Knowing, for example, the different logics of recruitment or promotion provided additional depth to what has been learned from ECAs. In this respect, the aim of interviewing UAs was to get a more nuanced understanding of the higher education landscape.

In order to meet this objective, the design of the interview protocol had to be approached differently from that of the ECAs. The focus was not on finding how structures were experienced by UAs (although often this was unavoidable), but how structures came about and how they were managed, understood, and rationalised from an institutional perspective. Questions in the interview protocol were designed in a way that positioned UAs both as creators of and participants in the structures. The initial focus in the interviews were questions concerning developments at the system level. Proceeding to developments at the institutional level, some (but not all) of the questions designed were similar to those discussed with ECAs, however, from an institutional human resource perspective.

5. Preparation for the interviews and the interview procedure

Early career academics

By way of preparation for each of the interviews, I revisited the demographic questionnaire of participants, which often helped to tailor some of the interview questions to their specific context. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at a time and location in which participants felt comfortable and secure, as a way of 'democratising the process of research itself' (Silverman 2004: 68). This was usually arranged through a phone-call which helped to develop a rapport at an early stage. Due to the lack of appropriate office infrastructure available to participants in their institutions (as many shared their offices with several others), or due to personal preferences, interviews were occasionally conducted in cafés. This setting presented a challenge due to background noise (e.g. music), making the later transcription more difficult. At the same time, it helped in creating a more relaxed and open atmosphere. Patton (2015) provides several examples of qualitative studies where interviews took the character of a more intimate conversation, as they were carried out in a less formal setting.

Interviews lasted from 60 minutes up to three hours, depending on the time and interest of the interviewee. On average, the interviews were approximately 90 minutes in duration. With the interviewees' permission, all conversations were audio recorded. Following Brounéus's (2011) proposal, the interview procedure included an introduction, initial questions, mid-interview questions and the closing of the interview. Building rapport was taken into consideration at all stages, including apprehension, exploration, co-operation and participation as suggested by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006). I approached each interview with a set of core questions in mind, however, each interview situation was a unique encounter. Hence, I did not use the interview protocol strictly, but as one that enables 'creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant's story is fully uncovered' (Knox and Burkard 2009: 3).

The interview usually started with an informal introduction, a point at which I also restated the rights of the participants and the purpose of the study, referring to the Participant Information Sheet where necessary. Typically, the first few questions were fairly easy to respond to, and were usually drawn from the demographic questionnaire. The goal was 'to get the interviewee talking' (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006: 316). Following this stage, I introduced the mid-interview questions by first starting with the cluster of questions that concerned the ordinary, but vitally, important, day-to-day experiences of ECAs. This helped naturally in the transition and widening of focus toward the second cluster of mid-interview questions aimed at providing a sense of the career trajectories of participants. The interview usually ended by asking participants if they would like to add something that was not covered previously, whether they have any questions for me, and thanking them for their time and participation.

During all stages of the interview, cross-referencing to what was said earlier was significant, in order to get as complete, honest, and nuanced a story as possible from ECAs. Probing was also carefully considered to elicit more detailed narratives. Some follow-up questions were pre-planned as part of the protocol, while others were unplanned and arose from specific interview situations. In both cases, the intent was to encourage participants to elaborate further on a certain issue 'under their own descriptions' (Archer 2003: 161) and to help them think more deeply about a question, or to clarify the meaning that participants associated with a certain idea or use of words. However, this was done without introducing new aspects that had not been previously mentioned by the interviewee or advocating for a specific answer, to avoid 'contaminating' (Archer 2003: 156) their thinking. Of significant importance also was giving participants time to think, tolerating pauses, and providing a window for their own wording and language to emerge.

University administrators

UAs were invited to take part in a face-to-face semi-structured interview arranged at a location and date suggested by the interviewee. Interviews typically lasted around 40 minutes (and up to 90 minutes), and with permission were audio recorded. Due to time constraints combined with the positionality of the interviewee present in elite interviewing, it was necessary to develop a framework with questions of priority. By 'elite' I refer to 'discussions with people who are chosen because of who they are or what position they occupy…to acquire information and context…that person can provide about some event or process' (Hochschild 2009: 1).

Two points were relevant in preparation for the interviews with UAs. First, in order to pick up on the experiences and challenges reported by the participating ECAs, interviews with UAs were, where possible, scheduled towards the end of the field work period. This allowed me to prepare for the interviews with UAs by regularly revisiting the audio recordings of ECAs from the same institution. Secondly, in order to ensure that I captured the specificity of each of the institutions in as much detail as possible, and to enable myself to tailor the interview in relation to the institution, I first became acquainted with the institutional mission, vision, as well as strategic and other available documents.

The interview protocol commonly took the following course. I usually began the interview by asking UAs to briefly introduce themselves in view of the positions they hold and to describe their institutions in their own words (e.g. its profile, mission, positioning in the sector). The discussion then moved towards a system-wide assessment of the Macedonian higher education landscape and recent reforms. Moving to institution-specific questions, at this point I introduced questions relating to the position of ECAs, taking into account the already-obtained input from

ECAs. These questions often had to be carefully crafted in order to avoid revealing that these issues have possibly been raised by ECAs. It is important to note that the unpredictability of UAs' schedules and a possible abrupt ending to the interview needed to be kept in consideration. I therefore attempted to not only keep close attention on the time when the interview had already expired, but also to address it this issue, for example by saying: 'I am aware your schedule is extremely busy, but I hope it is still possible to address the remaining two points'.

Cross-referencing to earlier points in the conversation was also significant in the interviews with UAs. Being able to say, for instance, 'So, how does that relate with what you said before about X?' gave me credibility as an interviewer, and at the same time helped me to prevent UAs from providing partial, inconsistent or imaginative accounts. It also enabled me to obtain a better idea of their reasoning and viewpoints, consequently providing me with more material to work with. I also attempted to make use of information obtained in previously conducted interviews with other UAs, with the aim of addressing a particular topic in more depth, again allowing me to look for similarities and differences in views.

6. Data analysis

Early career academics

Despite a wide use of qualitative research within the social sciences there is still no single or agreed upon approach that guides the process of analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). The diversity of approaches representing the qualitative method of analysis are connected to the different features that are seen as being important by researchers, depending on the nature and the context of their work (*ibid*.). Given my goal of understanding the individual's experience

and at the same time acknowledging the larger circumstances in which participants' accounts are constructed, I employed a thematic analysis.

The task of transcribing came at the beginning of the analytical process. In terms of transcription and analysis, the number of interviews was 'the most that this one person could handle' (Archer 2003:157). Taking into account the limited time allocated for this D.Phil research, a larger number of interviews would not only have been practically difficult, but would also be unsound ethically as it would have meant collecting more data than could be handled. All 32 interviews were transcribed verbatim and then added to a qualitative software package (NVivo v.11) that facilitated the process of safely storing, sorting and analysing the data. While the analysis was aided by NVivo, the coding process, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 46) maintain, is 'never a mechanistic activity', but rather an 'analytic' and 'cyclic procedure' (Schreier 2012: 41). I approached and enjoyed the data analysis as an 'imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive' process (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 10).

Before the thematic analysis was started, a first step was to read and reread each of the interviews in order to gradually immerse myself into the thinking and opinions of participants (Sfard and Prusak 2005). I then engaged in two levels of analysis. The primary analysis served to represent as best as possible the individual's own story (i.e. preserving individual variation), and 'to recognise the heterogeneity of meanings' (Archer 2003: 155). At this stage I developed a number of broad coding categories. In order to assist the coding and help determine the boundaries of each category I developed a systematic code book which displayed the key codes used and their definition (Table 3). 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.

Table 3. Framework for the primary level of analysis: individual variation

Name of coding category	Career trajectories	Day-to-day experiences	Agentive strategies	Structural constraints and enablements
Definition of coding category	- Text coded around ECAs' accounts of their careers and career decision-making in light of past experiences, present circumstances and ways of seeing the future.	- Text coded around ECAs accounts of their day-to-day experiences and daily decision-making in light of past experiences, present circumstances and ways of seeing the future.	- The different representations and forms of agency that ECAs are using in progressing their careers, managing day-to-day work, and overcoming challenges. - Strategically not doing something is also considered a form of agency here. - The emotional dimension of agency (that is, the mental process that ECAs undertake to respond to opportunities/challenges brought about by cognitive, rather than physical action) is also considered under this category. The ways in which observations of, interactions with and support from others enhances or reduces the agentic behaviour of ECAs falls into this category as well.	- The different career-related and day-to-day challenges/constraints that ECAs face in their work, as well as the opinions expressed by participants regarding their work or broader environment , the ability to network, time management, promotion criteria, personal context and so on. - The different enablements and affordances that ECAs perceive from the structural landscape at institutional and other levels (personal, national, supra-national etc.).

Once the primary analysis was done, I engaged in a thematic analysis, where I was in search of broader themes across the transcripts. The analysis at this secondary level was *a priori* informed

by the literature review and my conceptual framework to ensure a direct link to the research question of the study. The second-level of coding was also used for creating more detailed sub-themes, grouping together tighter categories that made sense analytically.

Where necessary, a third-level of coding was also conducted to avoid the 'intuitive fallacy of sameness' (Archer 2003: 157). At this level, I looked for specific instances that seemed exceptional, idiosyncratic, refuting, or challenging of broader patterns found at the secondary level of analysis. At all stages, relevant versions of the analysis were shared with my supervisors to verify the entire process and the robustness of the coding categories in light of the research question.

Although this study has initially benefited from theoretical insights, such as those of Margaret Archer, the analysis was mainly data driven. This allowed me to remain critically conscious of the danger of allowing Archer's 'world views' of analysis to invade mine as a researcher, having in mind the specificities and context of the study. Moreover, this opened up the data I gathered to a wider, organic, and multi-dimensional perspective of interpretation. In this respect, I was placing my organic data at the centre, and Archer's theory around the periphery.

University administrators

The process of data analysis for university administrators was treated independently from that of ECAs. Each of the 15 interviews was first transcribed before moving towards the analysis of common themes identified at the level of each institution. Once I reached the point of category saturation, whereby no new first-level categories emerged, I looked at second-level categories which aimed to capture themes relevant across all four institutions.

7. Data reporting

Positionality as a researcher: an insider-outsider

According to Naples (1997, cited in Hertz 1997: 71), ‘‘outsiderness’ and ‘insiderness’ [are not] fixed or static positions, and are differentially experienced and expressed’. Thus, depending on the context, I can be an insider or an outsider or both at the same time. Being an ‘insider-outsider’, I was in a unique position to conduct this research in North Macedonia, and I believe this positionality as a researcher was an asset rather than a barrier. My national-origin and my previous research work on higher education have bounded me strongly to the Macedonian context, as well as helped me understand the unique characteristics of the broader social landscape. From this perspective I was an insider who already had valuable insights into the field. At the same time, not having worked in Macedonian academia made me an outsider and provided me with appropriate distance to be able to remain sufficiently critical. It helped me keep some distance from respondents and enabled me to observe the studied phenomena from a more zoomed-out perspective. As a researcher coming from a foreign university, and as someone who does not have a direct link with the universities I examined, I not only felt being an outsider, but was also sometimes perceived as such by my participants.

Nevertheless, my identity, stances, convictions, ‘political outlooks’ (Archer 2003: 156) and perhaps even my background have naturally shaped this research and influenced my ‘interpretative act’ (Archer 2003: 156) interpretation of ECAs’ and UAs’ accounts. Like any other interpretative qualitative research, mine also ‘cannot be value free’ (Bryman 2008: 25), but according to Miles and Huberman (1994) this seems to be part of the empirical puzzle. As Archer notes (2003: 155-156) ‘the investigator…is necessarily an interpreter…[not] a ‘pure

visitor'…and is likely to err in his or her third person construal of anyone's private meaning'. Listening and reading my participants' opinions on different issues often served as an opportunity for me to become aware of my biases and earlier assumptions. The writing and feedback process from my supervisors also shed light on possible biases and how to avoid them in reporting my findings.

Early career academics

Whilst my analysis and reporting was mainly thematic, the presentation of my findings also has a narrative arc. Relying on narrative as a way of telling a story (Elliot 2005) was helpful in 'making connections between events, showing the influence of the passage of time and recounting the personal meaning of the experience' (McAlpine 2016: 33). In this respect, narrative provided a practical means to construct a coherent temporal plot about the career trajectories and day-to-day lives of ECAs, with a beginning, middle and end – a past, present and future (McAlpine 2016). To help the plot unfold, I sometimes used short vignettes, varying in length from 100-400 words, to portray a general understanding of a broader phenomenon or to exemplify certain experiences, themes and findings. However, I did not follow strictly the rules of writing vignettes (e.g. Holley and Colyar 2009) for reporting purposes. Extended and detailed narrative accounts were intentionally avoided to preserve the anonymity of participants. For this reason, in many cases vignettes were accompanied by direct interview excerpts, which are also significant for the preservation of the authenticity of the individual's voice and for providing insight into the particular narrative language they employ (Elliot 2005; Coulter and Smith 2009).

Another important benefit of presenting my findings in a narrative form was found in exposing additional ways in which structure and agency were at interplay across the analytical chapters

(7 and 8) and the two types of temporalities addressed therein. In this respect, narrative enabled me to understand that the interplay between structure and agency at one level (i.e. day-to-day experience) influenced interplay at the other (i.e. career trajectory), either by way of reinforcement or by creating tension. For instance, narrative laid bare how finding time to think about careers in day-to-day life impacted ECAs' career trajectories. Or how, for example, the available promotion opportunities impacted experiences and ways of behaving at the day-to-day level. So even though the two temporalities were analytically separate, narrative allowed me to capture naturally-occurring interactions in ways more complex than previous studies have been able to.

University administrators

Considering that UAs occupied a different position and role in the hierarchy from that of ECAs, it was important to carefully plan the use of data from these interviews, in order to avoid the perception of their views as 'invading' or representing 'reality', and consequently portraying ECAs' views as inferior or secondary. In this respect, their views needed to be separated from those of ECAs. It is important to remember that while UAs provided an additional perspective on structures, the structural landscape cannot be simply or straightforwardly read from their perceptions only. They had their own background assumptions, preferences, interests, as well as very different investments in and perspectives on structures. Therefore, their views should be seen as a supplement to depicting the unexplored Macedonian context, rather than as a representation or a corrective of the views offered by ECAs later on in the thesis.

Furthermore, their inclusion allowed competing storylines to emerge in terms of how they described and understood certain phenomena on the one hand, and how these were actually

lived and experienced by the ECAs who I interviewed, on the other. In this respect, having two types of participants occupying different roles created spaces for dialogue within this data: sometimes by exposing contradictions and sometimes by providing a more accurate representation of a situation (I come back to this in the closing chapter of my thesis).

8. Ethical considerations and anonymity

Early career academics

Any research that involves human participation requires close consideration of the potential impact the research may have on those involved. Building a relationship of trustworthiness between the researcher and the participant is considered crucial in the qualitative tradition (Silverman 2004). Before, during, and after the course of data collection and analysis, special care was taken to ensure anonymity of all participants, in order to allow them to engage in an open and honest discussion, and to be critical of their experience. Information about the rights of participants and the ways in which their anonymity will be preserved were repeatedly highlighted in several documents (e.g. in the Call for participants, in the Participant Information Sheet and in the Consent form) which also helped in establishing a rapport in addition to serving to reassure anonymity and confidentiality.

To protect their identity, all participants were given pseudonyms. In the presentation of results I took particular care to avoid contextual individualisation of participants, an important task in a relatively small higher education system such as the Macedonian. To ensure this I sometimes had to make alternations of some details reported in the findings that I believed may disclose the identity of participants. In similar ways to others using narrative for reporting on the experiences of ECAs (e.g. McAlpine 2016), some experiences needed to be recast in broad and

generic terms (for example, not referring to the specific place of study abroad, but just the wider geographical area [in a Western European country]). Evidently, the removal of information was a necessary step for preserving anonymity. However, in removing potentially sensitive information, I did so in a way that ensures that significant aspects of the phenomena described are not lost in the process of alternation or omission.

University administrators

In order to protect the anonymity of UAs, the final text of the study does not contain indication of their institution of employment. In all communication with UAs, particular care was taken not to disclose any information on the ECAs participating in the study, to avoid any possibility of contextual identification.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION TO NORTH MACEDONIA: THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

1. Introduction

As in any work of this magnitude, providing a clear understanding of the nature of the broader context(s) in which the study takes place is a necessary precondition to set the stage for what follows later on in the thesis. To this end, in this chapter, I detail the political, economic and social contexts in North Macedonia and how these have a direct or indirect bearing on the country's higher education system. The underlying aim of this approach is to address a common problem found within existing higher education research in the CEE region where, as Stensaker et al. note (2014), higher education is often treated as a phenomenon isolated from economic, social and political developments or from society in general.

In the following subsections, within the boundaries of the political, economic and social sphere, I describe several contemporary events from North Macedonia's recent history, along with a reflection on the impact these events have for understanding the situation within the higher education sector. In doing so I cover issues of corruption and political instability, unemployment and migration, as well as related challenges connected to the multi-ethnic composition of the country, and the complex external relationship North Macedonia has had in recent decades.

2. Political context: two external and two internal challenges

Geographically, North Macedonia is a land-locked country situated at the centre of the Balkan Peninsula. The country shares borders with five neighbouring countries: Bulgaria to the East,

Albania to the West, Serbia and Kosovo to the North and Greece to the South. Modern North Macedonia, in its present borders, emerged in 1945 as one of the six constitutive republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following the break-up of Yugoslavia, North Macedonia gained its independence in 1991 and was the only country to gain its independence entirely peacefully. With its size of 25,713 sq. km North Macedonia is one of the smallest countries in Europe, with a total population of just over two million inhabitants (of which nearly a quarter live in the capital Skopje).

The two external challenges: the name dispute with Greece and the EU prospects of the country

Since its early existence, the country has operated in a difficult context and has been facing strong political challenges, both externally and internally. Externally, a key political challenge has been the recognition of the country in the United Nations under its constitutional name, essentially due to objections from Greece, based upon the existence of an adjacent region in Greece also known by the name North Macedonia. The so-called name-issue led to a three decade-long dispute between the two countries, which was partially resolved in 1993 when the UN admitted North Macedonia as a member-state under the provisional name 'the former Yugoslav Republic of North Macedonia' (FYROM), until an all-encompassing agreement might be reached with Greece. Since North Macedonia became an independent state, more than 150 countries have recognised the country under this provisional constitutional name. However, the name remained a key obstacle regarding North Macedonia's eventual admission into NATO and the European Union, which has repeatedly been vetoed by Greece.

At the time when this thesis was commenced, the name dispute was still active and no solution appeared to be in sight. Negotiations between the Macedonian and Greek diplomats seldom

happened as internal problems in both countries were pressing. This situation changed in June 2018 when the so-called 'Prespa Agreement' was reached between the Governments of the two countries, whereby Greece would unblock North Macedonia's EU/NATO aspirations if it renames itself the Republic of North North Macedonia. To seal the deal, a referendum took place in North Macedonia in late September 2018. Ahead of the referendum, the Macedonian capital of Skopje, usually not a frequent destination for international diplomats and politicians, saw a flurry of foreign A-listers (including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, UK Prime Minister Theresa May and many other leaders) paying a visit to support the ground-breaking deal. Yet, on referendum day the turnout was unexpectedly low (36%), far short of the 50% needed to make the result valid under the Macedonian constitution, even though 91% of the ballots were in favour of the accord. The success of the boycott by opponents of the deal (including the largest opposition party as well as the former President of the country) contributed to the deepening of the political crisis. Eventually, and in spite of the referendum result, in January 2019, the Macedonian Parliament voted in favour of the agreement. A few weeks later, the Greek Parliament also ratified the agreement, officially putting an end to the three-decades long dispute. Under its new official name of 'North Macedonia', the country joined NATO in March 2020.

Even though North Macedonia became a candidate for EU accession talks in 2005 (about the same time as Croatia, which is now an EU member state) the country still remains to be on the EU's doorsteps. The name issue was seen as the biggest obstacle to starting the negotiation process, which was expected to begin by October 2019 as EU officials repeatedly pledged both before the referendum took place and after the agreement with Greece was made. However, France and President Macron opposed this path at the meeting of the European Council in October 2019, refusing to allow a start of the negotiation process with North Macedonia,

insisting that the EU should concentrate first and foremost on its own reforms before engaging in any further enlargement. He also called for a new methodology of accession negotiations. In doing so, he brushed aside repeated appeals from all the heads of the EU institutions and from other EU leaders, in particular Chancellor Merkel who had tried to convince him of the critical importance of the EU respecting the repeated promises made to the Western Balkan region over the years and of the EU's own strategic interests in bringing the countries of the region into the EU. At the time when this thesis was completed (December 2020), the country was still waiting to start the negotiation process with the EU.

The political consequences of the rejection could be serious both domestically and regionally, and many EU leaders, such as the President of the European Commission Junker, have already spoken of a 'major historic mistake' being made against North Macedonia (The Guardian 2019, online). Observers have expressed concerns that the decision to delay the start of the negotiations indefinitely is a detrimental blow for the country and is likely to deflate the Government's reform agenda. It is reasonable to expect that if the decision to reject North Macedonia is not overturned in a short period of time, the country may experience worsening levels of corruption, economic decline and further backsliding in democratic reforms. Moreover, Euroscepticism (which so far has been marginal) is likely to grow and the decision could bring back hard-line nationalist elements around the name issue, as well as criminal networks who are quite happy to see the status quo continuing. Contrary to widespread political rumours, however, the decision of the EU does not necessarily mean that Russia will immediately jump into the gap left by Brussels, at least not in the short term. After all, Russia's economic influence does not come anywhere close to allocating the financial means that the EU has in the country. Since 2007, the EU has invested over 1.2 billion euros in North Macedonia (European Commission 2019).

The impacts of these processes (i.e. the name-change and the start of EU negotiations) on the Macedonian higher education system are indirect, but nevertheless significant. Certainly, it could be argued that the name resolution that has been reached holds promising potential of bringing the Macedonian higher education closer to some of the accomplishments of those in European Union member states, as well as for their future aims and aspirations. It must be said, however, that for this to be achieved, a great deal will depend on the commitment of domestic actors. As evident from other post-transition countries such as Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, that have recently joined the EU, it is not only access to relevant EU policy structures that matters, but also the political capacity and willingness of the country in question. Part of the reason for this is related to how European higher education initiatives work compared to EU initiatives in other public policy areas. Although the characterisation of the EU's higher education initiatives as strictly voluntary may be misleading (Gorntizka 1999; Stensaker et al. 2014), the Europeanisation literature, without much dispute, recognises their relatively non-binding character and soft transfer of power (Börzel 2002; Corbett 2011; Vukasović 2012). Thus, in the case of policy transfer, European initiatives rarely provide a strict model to be followed by domestic actors, which leads to significant diversity in implementation outcomes (Westerheijden et al. 2010).

In this respect, as far as higher education is concerned, the standards that North Macedonia is expected to fulfil as an accession candidate to the European Union are rather vague and remain at the level of a recommendation. As part of the requirement to join the EU, North Macedonia is assessed in 33 areas of the *Acquis Communautaire,* including the area of Science and Research (covered in Chapter 25 of the Acquis) and, Education and Culture (covered in Chapter 26 of the Acquis). However, the key focus in the screening process so far has not been

on these two chapters, but rather on assessing the country's capacity to fulfil political and economic criteria, such as the rule of law, human rights, freedom of media, movement of goods and monetary policy. This implies that (higher) education, science and research, as far as North Macedonia's accession process for EU membership is concerned, serve only as a secondary requirement.

This is quite evident if one looks at the yearly Progress Reports that the European Commission publishes to evaluate the level of progress that North Macedonia has made in all 33 areas of the Acquis Communautaire. The issues covered in chapters 25 and 26 provide a very brief, and often highly repetitive, overview of the situation and rarely extend beyond a few paragraphs (which is not the situation with many other key chapters). The monitoring and evaluation of (higher) education is more formalistic than substantive in nature. The usual focus is on fulfilling technical criteria such as legislative alignments and general remarks about the level of spending in education. As to the terminology used, the assessment of the progress made is often reduced to a single word such as 'partial', 'reasonable' or 'good', allowing much space for interpretation, if not almost complete ambiguity. Hence it is often difficult to understand what is being said, and how it has been measured. Under these circumstances, it seems impossible for the progress reports to act as effective tools triggering North Macedonia's reform processes in the field of education, science and research. It would not be wide of the mark to claim that the progress reports, at least in the terrain that I cover in this thesis, fail to serve their purpose. Additionally, since the first progress report was published in 2006, no reference has so far been made to the situation within the academic profession, and the multiple challenges that academics and their institutions have been facing.

The first internal challenge: the multi-ethnic character of North Macedonia

Internally, one of the main political challenges for the country concerns its multi-ethnic character and the divisions that have ensued from these. In terms of ethnic belonging, Macedonians account for 64% of the population, with a further 25% being Albanians, 4% Turks, 3% Roma and a smaller percentage of other ethnic groups. Ethnicity, for the two largest groups, overlaps with religious belonging: with Macedonians usually following Orthodox Christianity and Albanians usually identifying with Islam. Throughout the period of socialist Yugoslavia (1946-1991), there were major disparities between ethnic groups in many spheres of social life (for example, in public administration employment, political representation, the judiciary, and other leading positions in society in general) (Czaplinski 2008). Even after establishing its independence, this continued to be a major problem for North Macedonia. Eventually, in 2001, it resulted in an armed conflict between the paramilitary Albanian National Liberation Army and Macedonian State Forces, lasting for six months in the western part of the country where the majority of ethnic Albanians are situated.

After the armed conflict - widely understood as originating from the 'spillover' from the war in neighbouring Kosovo (Baćević 2014) - and the conclusion of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), more favourable legal and political conditions were created, which provided institutional opportunities for overcoming the discrimination against and unfavourable position of ethnic Albanians and other minority communities. Various reforms initiated under the premise of the OFA agreement have contributed to better inter-ethnic dialogue: however, an often-claimed narrative still remains that the different ethnicities co-exist in parallel rather than living together (Czaplinski 2008). Most political parties still

organise and mobilise voters along ethno-national lines, rather than on a civic platform. To a large extent, the same applies to media, civil society, the economy and education.

The significance of the ethnic (minority) question is evident in the context of higher education, as it is in all other aspects of Macedonian society. In fact, the development of higher education in North Macedonia, in particular following the break-up of Yugoslavia, is fundamentally intertwined with the multi-ethnic character of the country. Despite being the only republic of former Yugoslavia to secede peacefully, the secession 'opened questions for the biggest ethnic minority, Albanians, who feared that North Macedonia, outside of the multicultural context of Yugoslavia, would develop into a 'mono-ethnic' state' (Baćević 2014: 297). At the same time, many ethnic Macedonians, on their part, 'feared that the real goal behind Albanian demands, including the founding of an Albanian language university, was to create parallel structures as a first step, following the Kosovo example, in the direction of separation' (Czaplinski 2008: 18).

In this respect, providing higher education access to Albanians and in the Albanian language was one of the most pressing issues facing the newly independent state. However, as Baćević (2014) notes, the Macedonian Government in the 1990s was very slow to address this issue, resorting to legalistic interpretations according to which higher education could only be offered in the Macedonian language. Partially in response to this, the Albanian community established a 'para-university' in 1994/1995 which was deemed by the state as illegal and unconstitutional. During the opening ceremony the police killed one Albanian and several others were wounded. This and other alarming events beyond higher education at that time reflected the growing rift between the Macedonian and Albanian ethnic communities, which eventually led to the armed conflict in 2001.

The half-year long armed conflict and OFA peace treaty signed at the end of it had a lasting impact on the configuration of higher education in North Macedonia. Namely, it galvanised international support for the opening of a trilingual university (the South East European University) offering teaching in Macedonian, Albanian and English, and it contributed to the creation of special enrolment quotas aimed to improve the access to higher education of minority groups. In this respect, higher education played a fundamental role in addressing some of the shortcomings in the system of minority rights and protection, and served as 'one of the best possible instruments of building a tolerant and integrated society' (Czaplinski 2008: 19).

Concerning the immediate interest of this study, there are no official statistics or reports that point to the proportion of minority groups within the academic profession. Nevertheless, it could be supposed that the number of minority academics is disproportionately lower than the number of minority students (for which the state determines special quotas). While diversifying the professoriate is becoming a top priority on many campuses world-wide, this issue is almost never brought up inside Macedonian universities or by state authorities, regardless of whether this concerns representation based on gender, ethnicity or race.

The ethnic distribution among academics was briefly raised in 2010 when public universities received a Government-initiated request for academics to declare their ethnicity for the purposes of statistics and of combating potential discrimination. The proposal was widely criticised by a significant portion of the Macedonian academic community (as expected, particularly by ethnic Macedonians) on the basis that the demographic composition of the academic profession should reflect the academic potential of individuals, rather than ethnicity. In this respect, it was argued that collecting such data would harm the meritocratic character

of academia. Due to the fact that many academics took a hard-line position on this issue, the proposal was later withdrawn.

Based on previous experiences in other public sectors as to how the Government has (mis)handled the task of creating conditions for achieving greater equality, the criticism voiced by many academics was not entirely unfounded. Yet, it seems relevant to say that the majority of the Macedonian academic community missed the point of the reform or at least some of its benefits, especially since there are now multiple examples internationally, from both renowned and less renowned universities, where such data creates conditions for making discrimination more visible. In fact, it is safe to say that one of the strong starting points in identifying potential discrimination is statistics.

The second internal challenge: the political crisis and the wire-tapping scandal

Internally, in addition to the long-standing issue connected to ethnicity, the recent (and arguably still ongoing) political crisis deserves special attention as well. In 2015, the head of the then main opposition party SDSM, Zoran Zaev - now Prime Minister - accused the Government of running an illegal phone-tapping programme which, he claimed, covered up to 20,000 people, involving journalists, politicians (from the Government and the opposition), and other public figures (including academics), over a four-year period. The opposition got a hold of the recordings through an anonymous source and released to the public over a hundred audio conversations between top Government officials - citing them as proof of the Government's undemocratic behaviour. The recordings exposed what many already suspected: that non-transparency, political patronage, clientelism and coercion are endemic and deeply engrained elements of politicians' behaviour. They provided an ample amount of evidence for

the embezzlement of hundreds of millions of euros, corruption and extortion, political interference in the judiciary, media and education. The Government at that time, quite expectedly, repeatedly denied any connection to the conversations, claiming they are fabricated, and a product of foreign intelligence units.

The wire-tapping scandal severely affected all spheres of society, including higher education. In the beginning, the adoption of changes to the Law on Higher Education was hampered by the opposition, which had boycotted the Parliament since the beginning of the crisis. Soon after, three consecutive cycles of elections took place, resulting in all the envisioned reforms in the field of higher education dropping down the agenda and being put on hold. The later appointment of a new Minister of Education did little to add momentum to the stalled process of reform.

In the published series of leaked wire-tapped conversations, several recordings were focused on exposing the level of control that the former ruling party VMRO-DPMNE had over employment in the public sector. Two recordings, specifically, provided evidence from the higher education sector. The first of these recorded conversations was between a Member of the Parliament (MP) from the ruling party and a Rector from a public university. In the conversation, the ruling party's MP is heard asking for a favour from the Rector to employ a person close to the MP. The MP suggested to the Rector to first give this person 'a volunteer position so people can get to know him', while in the meantime he would try to arrange formal consent from the Ministry of Finance – which is a prerequisite for opening a new academic position. The conversation ended with the Rector's agreement to follow the line of steps suggested by the MP.

The second of these telephone conversations from the wiretapped recordings concerning academia was between two MPs from the then ruling party VMRO-DPMNE, Silvana Boneva and Nadica Tancheva. In ways similar to the first conversation, the audio provided insight into questionable dealings between the ruling party and one public university. The main topic of conversation was the arrangement of Boneva's enrolment as a student at the public university, something that Tancheva was willing to assist with. During the conversation, Boneva herself admitted that 'the whole idea is really shameful', however Tancheva then convinces her that 'she will push the thing through' as it would be a 'pity not to use this opportunity'. She further reassures Boneva that 'it will be done', as the Dean of the Faculty is 'one of ours'. Tancheva also promises to make sure to sign up Boneva for courses that are taught by 'our professors'.

These brief but illustrative examples illuminate a great deal about the challenges that North Macedonia is facing in democratising its institutions and in putting an end to the influence of party-politics. The influence of politics is widespread and evident in almost every cell of society. The European Commission (2016), in one of the latest accession progress reports, has deemed North Macedonia a 'captured state'[6], referring to the interference of politics in key areas of society. The same report noted the lack of separation between the state and the ruling party, and raised concerns about the effectiveness of the rule of law in such conditions. As Siljanovska-Davkova (2005: XX) notes, the influence of politics is so big in North Macedonia that often 'it is difficult to tell where the state ends and the party begins'.

6 The definition of the World Bank understands state capture 'as the illicit provision of private gains to public officials via informal, non-transparent, and highly preferential channels of access. It can occur through unclear boundaries between the political and business interest of state officials, which has been a particularly prominent characteristic of many transition countries' (World Bank 2000: 3, cf. Karklins 2002).

In these circumstances, the impact of political parties is not limited to the political arena. Becoming a member of a political party is an attractive goal for many people, not mainly because of their interest in being politically engaged, but because of the well-established practice of political parties acting as the main channel for getting employed in the public administration (Gjuzelov 2012). In this context, as Hislope (2013: 627) notes, 'all parties in North Macedonia function as de facto job agencies'. This practice often translates in the private sector as well, where 'even positions in the toll stations on the highways are assigned according to party membership' (Gaber-Damjanovski and Jovevska 2008: 28)'.

A recent study on youth unemployment in North Macedonia shows that the majority of participants expressed a belief that party loyalty is the safest and fastest road to their desired job, primarily (but not just) in the public sector (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2016). The Freedom House Report for North Macedonia for 2016 also notes that: 'knowing the right people with family and political connections is still the easiest way to get a job in the public sector, despite the European Commission's repeated calls for a smaller and more professional public administration' (Freedom House 2016).

Finally, as in almost all newly established democracies in the post-communist bloc in CEE, North Macedonia is struggling with high rates of corruption. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perception Report for 2018, North Macedonia is ranked 93rd in the world, and as one of the three most corrupt countries in the Western Balkan region alongside Kosovo and Albania (Transparency International 2019). A Progress Report (2017: 73) commissioned by the European Union notes that 'education in the country remains a high risk sector for corruption and political influence, especially in higher education'.

There are several surveys and reports that have specifically addressed the problem of corruption within higher education institutions. What is common to all of them is that they point to a high perception of corruption among students, university employees and the general public in North Macedonia. For instance, a survey by the Youth Educational Forum (2012), conducted with 330 students from the University of Skopje, showed that corruption was one of the top five problems identified by students. These results are mirrored in a survey by the Institute for Strategic Research and Education, conducted on a sample of 501 students from four universities, which shows that 54% of respondents considered that corruption exists at universities (Dokmanovikj 2017). Buying textbooks from professors was the most common forms of corruption identified by students. The same study shows that 90% did not know where to report corruption at their university, and that one quarter of students were not prepared to report corruption. According to Arifi (2017), fear and lack of trust that appropriate measures will be taken are the main reasons why Macedonian students hesitate to report corruption cases. A field survey measuring citizens' attitudes about corruption concluded that doctors receive the most bribes, followed by police officers, public servants, customs officials, and by university professors in the fifth place (Mojanoski et al. 2015). According to a United Nations poll which compared public sector/institutional corruption levels as seen by the general public, public universities were perceived as frequently taking part in corrupt practices, which ranked them in the fourth place amongst sectors/institutions nationally (UNODC 2011).

Even though the exact level of corruption in any higher education system is difficult to measure, what the above-mentioned studies suggest is that Macedonian higher education institutions are generally perceived as corrupt by a range of constituents within and outside the sector. Moreover, it is evident that academics and the academic profession are perceived to be highly involved in corruption. While this may be true to some degree, the perception may also

be a direct consequence of how the media portrays academics and due to the fact that academic staff alongside doctors have often been at the limelight of most Government initiated anti-corruption campaigns, which spreads a negative public image of them. As Heynemann et al. (2008) warn, the perception of corruption in higher education may be higher than corruption itself, and can be influenced by a number of factors, including how corruption is presented by authorities or in the media. In a study aiming to examine the coverage of two reputable media houses on issues of corruption in higher education in North Macedonia, Hajrullai (2015) notes various forms of corruption that get the attention of the media, such as bribery, services in exchange for grades, nepotism and fraud, among others. Most of them, if we follow the distinction made by Hallak and Poisson (2007), can be labelled as instances of petty rather than large scale corruption. At the same time, less explicit (and arguably more severe) manifestations of corruption, such as arranging tenders, misuse of funds or collecting illegal expenditures, are rarely brought to public attention.

In this respect, addressing corruption within universities is still a taboo. Activities to eliminate or reduce corruption are infrequent, or as Arifi (2017: 166) notes, 'at best symbolic'. It is hard to find a case of corruption that has received due care by universities or by public prosecution. As Zivkovikj (2016: 11) notes, 'the absence of a strategy to tackle this problem both at a national and university level is rather obvious'. Initiatives and provisions - such as the introduction of a Student Ombudsman, various ethics committees and codes of conduct, offices and hot-lines to report corruption - have proved to be unsuccessful. The lack of commitment to tackle this issue seriously affects the quality of education on offer, and creates a reputational harm for the higher education sector as whole and the academic profession in particular.

3. Economic context: high rates of unemployment

Historically, from an economic point of view, North Macedonia was one of the poorest of the ex-Yugoslav republics. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the armed conflicts that marked the former-Yugoslav region in the 1990s, the country lost a significant share of its market and much of its infrastructure, which led to an economic downturn. The transition from a state-planned economy towards a free market one was yet another challenge that seriously hindered North Macedonia's economic growth in the 1990s. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the international dispute with Greece, the inter-ethnic relations in the country, the global financial turmoil in 2008 and the recent domestic political crisis all brought a high economic cost to society, and additionally complicated the economic recovery of the country.

The European Union is the most important economic partner of North Macedonia. Of its total trade in 2018, 70% was with member states, while over 80% of North Macedonia's exports went to EU countries (European Commission 2019). Trade between the two is almost fully liberalised and successive governments have continuously prioritised foreign direct investments from the EU. In 2017, the top five source countries of foreign direct investment in North Macedonia were all EU member states (European Commission 2018). The incentives provided by the Government to attract foreign investments (for example, a flat tax rate and free economic zones) have placed the country at the 10th place on the World Bank's list for Ease of Doing Business Ranking for 2019 – the best ranking of any country in the Balkans and the fifth-highest in Europe (The World Bank 2019).

The biggest problem of North Macedonia's economy is the continuously high unemployment rate, which currently stands at 16.5%, among the highest in Europe (SSORM 2020). The unemployment rate among youth is even more concerning, having reached 36.8% and ranking

the country second in Europe behind Greece (*ibid*.). The situation is even more pressing considering the fact that the duration of unemployment for youth is quite long: only about 40% of young people in the country find employment within 1-3 years after leaving the education system (*ibid*.).

In such circumstances it is no surprise that young people quite consistently identify unemployment as their biggest problem, even high-school students who are not yet active in the labour market (Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. 2011). A study from 2013 revealed that 60% of young people over 18 believed that they will have trouble finding a job and that personal and political ties rank first on the scale of factors for landing a job (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2013). The same study revealed, contrary to general trends in Western Europe, that young people prefer employment in the public sector rather than in the private sector, in spite of the lower salaries and poorer work conditions offered. An often-cited reason for this is the greater stability that jobs in the public sector have to offer (Osbild and Bartlett 2019).

What is important from the point of view of my study is that unemployment is still high even among workers with higher education qualifications. According to the official data of the State Statistical Office, the general unemployment rate has shown moderate signs of decline over the last decade. However, in the same period, the unemployment rate among people with a degree has doubled from 7% in 2008 to 16% of the total unemployed in 2018 (SSORM 2020) – putting into question the high returns of higher education. In fact, one of the most striking pieces of data related to the transition from education to employment is that a 'higher level of education is not advantageous on the Macedonian labour market: the likelihood of being employed does not increase for those with a university degree compared to those with a high school diploma' (Reactor 2012: 32).

It could be argued that the main reason for this is connected to the existing mismatch between the growing number of graduates and the real demands of the labour market which is currently unable to absorb new entrants. Universities, alongside the Government, are often targeted for contributing to this gap. The main criticism can be associated with the poor adjustment mechanisms that are implemented to provide greater alignment between the supplied labour and the required skills for employment. According to a study by the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences, only 13% of all graduates can find good employment based on their qualifications (MAAS 2017). This data seems to be crucial to understanding the risks involved in increasing higher education attainment, considering that the market is unable to absorb the increased number of graduates and to meet the expectations of students.

4. Social context: migration

The political and economic events in the country have significantly impinged upon its social life as well. The high rate of unemployment combined with the increased political uncertainty in the country has, quite expectedly, encouraged many, mostly young, people to emigrate in search of a better life and realisation of their personal and professional ambitions. As Bassey (1992: 10) rightly suggests, 'when young people drop off the education production line and cannot find work at all, or [cannot find] work which meets their abilities and expectations, then we are only creating frustration with perhaps disturbing social consequences'.

A particular challenge for estimating the scale of migration is that no reliable 'brain-drain' statistics are available in the country, in part due to the fact that the last population census was conducted in 2002. Yet, multiple studies and surveys provide valuable insight into the situation. The latest World Bank report on 'Migration and brain-drain in Europe and Central Asia' shows that a quarter of North Macedonia's population (approximately 500,000 people) have already

left the country in the last two decades (The World Bank 2019). According to the same report, the emigration rate of high-skilled workers in North Macedonia is one of the highest in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, with almost 40% of people that have migrated having a higher education degree. As of 2017, the report notes that more than a third of the university-educated workforce in North Macedonia was living abroad, and that 'about 70% of people employed in North Macedonia's higher education system were planning to emigrate; 20% of them had already applied for jobs abroad' (*ibid*.).

A related concern is the expressed readiness of young people to emigrate abroad. Multiple surveys have consistently warned about the increasingly high readiness of young people to leave the country. For instance, a survey conducted in 2011, covering a total of 3,607 high school students, showed that almost half of the respondents (46%) do not see themselves in the country in 10 years time (Korunovska-Srbijanko et al. 2011). According to the research findings from a study targeting youth in general, every second young person considers leaving the country (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2016). This rate is even higher (80%) among the unemployed youth (*ibid*.).

The situation is not much different for young academic staff and young medical doctors in the country. The results of a quantitative survey I have conducted on a sample of 487 academics in North Macedonia shows that almost two-thirds (63%) of ECAs have considered taking an academic position outside the country, while the same holds true for every second (52.5%) senior academic (Galevski 2014). According to a statement from the Association of Private Practitioners, every year 173 doctors apply for emigration abroad, with 220 doctors graduating from the Faculty of Medicine in Skopje (APP 2019). The numbers outlined above serve as an alarming attestation of the scale of the problem.

Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that North Macedonia has been facing a serious demographic decline and an aging population. If we follow recent developments in countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, the demographic pressure is likely to increase (rather than decrease) with North Macedonia eventually joining the EU and the subsequent opening of the European market to Macedonian workers. Pressured by this problem, the Government has adopted the 2013-2020 National Strategy for Networking, Cooperation and Reducing the Outflow of Highly Educated and Professional Staff. Yet, in nearing its end, the strategy does not seem to have yielded any positive results. According to Janeva et al. (2018), the strategy and the accompanying legal framework addressing the migration of youth are rather clear and if treated seriously, quite promising. However, as the authors explain, the problems arise concerning the implementation and adaptation of the measures in practice (*ibid.*). So, at the moment it seems that strategic documents alone are unlikely to fix the problem, especially bearing in mind the political and policy-making culture in the country where documents of this sort usually remain a theoretical exercise in wishful thinking.

Even though the exact economic cost of youth migration in the country is hard to assess due to a lack of official data, it is quite evident that if the trend of migration continues, what is currently invested in young people through education and other means will ultimately be a substantial waste as far as the country is concerned. A recent study conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) provides valuable insight into this situation. Based on their approximative methodology, the results obtained show that the total education costs of people who leave North Macedonia in one year, depending on the educational structure, vary from 116 million to 433 million euros (WFD 2019). Due to the inability to prevent annual emigration, the potential annual gross added value loss is measured around 333 million euros, which is around 3.1% of the 2018 GDP (*ibid*.). According to the same study,

every work-able person who leaves North Macedonia takes approximately €15,850 of some potential future GDP with them.

From a social perspective, the pressing problem of unemployment has resulted in the absence of conditions for young people to become financially independent. It is quite common for young people to live with their parents well into their 20s and 30s, or up until the point they get married. In fact, as many as 80% of young people above the age of 18 still live with their parents (Topuzovska-Latkovikj et al. 2013). This situation, however, is not specific to North Macedonia only. A similar situation is observable across Southeastern Europe, where new generations are known to stay and live longer with their parents (Polese et al. 2014). There is certainly a cultural component, but the structural, and possibly more important one, as Polese et al. (2014) argue, is the difficulty in finding a well-paid job that provides long-term security. As a result, the older generation almost regularly offers some kind of financial support (de facto unemployment benefits or job seeking allowance) by granting free housing and free food until the new generation becomes able to leave the family nest and secure space for greater independence.

5. Conclusions

What this chapter has revealed is that the past few decades have been a turbulent period for North Macedonia. The country has undergone a series of difficult transformations in all sectors, including in its political, economic and social systems. Crises in these areas have often translated into crisis in higher education – which points out that what happens in the sector is closely linked to other aspects of the country's development. Quite evidently, the political instability and shaky economy over recent years have created a dangerous cocktail which poses challenges to the higher education sector. The complex external relations with Greece and the

EU also pose, though indirectly, some threats to the European integration of Macedonian higher education. In this respect, these broader contexts cannot be isolated from the overall functioning of higher education. That these contexts matter so much, in multiple and often complex ways, becomes clearer in the remaining chapters of the thesis - where which of them matter the most is elaborated, as is the question of how they attune the creation of policies and the behaviour of actors.

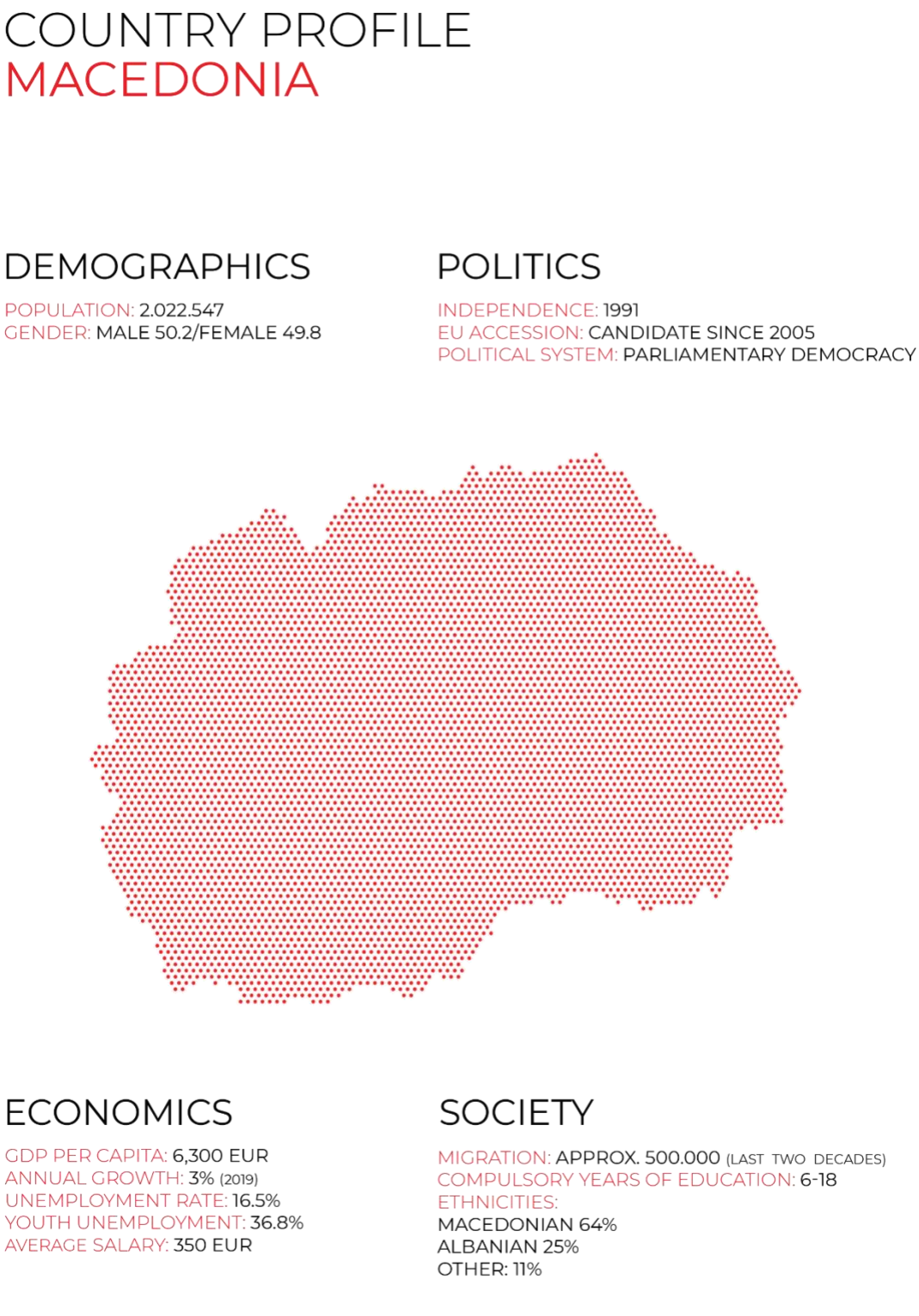


Figure 1. Country Profile - North Macedonia

CHAPTER 5

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MACEDONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: CURRENT PRESSURES AND CHALLENGES

1. Introduction

North Macedonia, much like many other countries within the CEE region, has not been the focus of interest of many higher education researchers. Up to today, one can count only a small number of authors that have previously conducted higher education research in and about North Macedonia. This small country in the south of Europe is treated as a peripheral case, mostly unknown to experts and to the general public. Hence, in order to set the stage for the analytical chapters that will follow, it is natural and unavoidable to first give due attention to the defining characteristics of the country's higher education sector with all its current pressures and challenges.

In the following subsections, relying on previous research, I address a number of issues. In Section 2, I briefly trace the historical emergence of the Macedonian higher education sector, its waves of expansion over the years, and the types of institutions that exist. In section 3, I then provide a general overview of the academic labour market, focusing mainly on the number and profile of academics working in the sector. In section 4 I describe the position that the State and the universities have within the system of higher education governance and how this impacts on issues of stability and change. In Section 5, I focus on how the Macedonian higher education system interprets and engages with a set of international forces that shape and define the situation of the sector, with both positive and negative implications. Finally, in Section 6, I close this chapter by offering some preliminary conclusions about the Macedonian higher

education landscape intended to serve as a starting point for understanding the later chapters of the thesis.

2. The Macedonian higher education: history, expansion and types of institutions

The Macedonian higher education system has a rather short history. The country's first university (University of Skopje) was founded in 1949 – much later compared to the oldest Yugoslav universities in Zagreb (founded in 1874), Belgrade (1905) and Ljubljana (1919). For precisely half a century (until the early 2000s), the system consisted of only two public universities, the University of Skopje and the University in Bitola established in 1979.

The third university in the country, the South East European University (SEEU), was only founded in 2001 as a public-private institution aimed at catering to the needs of the Albanian ethnic community in the aftermath of a six month long inter-ethnic conflict that took place earlier that same year. In this sense, this university had a dual purpose of responding to the long-neglected education needs of ethnic Albanians, while ensuring a peace-building and reconciliation function (Baćević 2014).

The opening of SEEU marked the start of the liberalisation period of higher education in the country and opened up space for other providers. Due to soft legal criteria and low barriers to establishment, the number of private providers increased rapidly within a couple of years and a dozen new universities had opened by 2010. The explosive and sudden growth of the private sector caught State authorities 'off-guard'. Having no previous history of private higher education up to that point, the expansion was not well-understood, and the State lacked a vision regarding the broader public interest and role that these institutions would serve and undertake within the system.

The absence of a clear legislative framework allowed a number of private institutions to operate in ‘grey areas’, outside the formal higher education regulation system or without adequate permission. It has taken several years for the Ministry of Education to install more adequate regulations or accreditation procedures to clean up some of the most illegitimate private institutions, but even today this process is far from over. As a result, programs of lower quality have often been associated with private higher education providers and some of them have been criticised for being profit-oriented businesses that serve as ‘diploma mills’ rather than serving educational purposes (Galevski 2014b). This perception is often shared across the entire Eastern bloc, where private providers are still in ‘search of their legitimacy’ (Slantcheva and Levy 2007: 281). In some countries (e.g., Poland), the process of privatisation is now in retreat, which has led to a gradual ‘de-privatisation’ (Kwiek 2017) and ‘re-monopolisation’ (Kwiek 2014) of higher education by public institutions.

Despite hopes for diversification, private universities have mainly offered programs in the social sciences that already existed at public universities. Due to a lack of funding and limited human capital, private universities have been unable to generate momentum and establish themselves as a subsector that might challenge the supremacy of public universities. However, over the last several years, a number of private universities are showing signs of more openness and agility, which public universities have been missing for many years.

Following this first booming wave of private providers in the early 2000s, a second wave of expansion took place in the domain of public higher education providers. Based on the Government’s plan to expand access to higher education, over the last decade and a half, four new public universities have been founded. Much in the same way as with the private wave of expansion, the growth of public institutions has not been left unchallenged. Observers have

addressed the inadequacy of having that many public institutions, questioning whether increasing the number of institutions would result in better education (Petruševski and Najčevska 2011). An associated concern has been that this would ultimately lead to a too-simple and possibly dangerous change of emphasis from a qualitative to a quantitative growth of higher education (Stevanovikj et al. 2019).

The expansion of the system extended further and reached its peak with the Government's decision in 2008 to begin so-called 'dispersed studies' (*disperzirani studii*), i.e. satellite campuses. This reform entailed new Faculties and programs of study being added to the existing public universities in quick succession and being dispersed across the entire country. This has happened to the extent that almost every town (some of them with less than 10,000 citizens) now has two, three, or even more *disperzirani* units. As a result of the reform, the number of study programmes within the public universities has nearly tripled in just over a decade (from 45 in 2008 to 138 in 2019), while the number of students over the same period has increased only by a small margin (from 45,687 in 2008 to 52,648 at the end of 2019)(SSORM 2020, online). This again has raised doubts as to the necessity of having so many programmes in a period of a general demographic decline and negative migration trends in the country.

This *disperzija* policy was introduced by the Macedonian Government on the grounds that it would provide students outside of the main cities with the possibility of studying in close proximity to home, reducing the costs for studies, and ultimately providing more affordable and broader access to higher education. In principle, and on at first glance, the reform has partially managed to achieve this, but, as Popovski (2010) reports in 'The Dispersion as a Macedonian Phenomenon', there are several problems with this policy, including the lack of

appropriate infrastructure and facilities and the low number of students showing interest in these programmes.[7] Also worth mentioning is that the total number of academics working within public higher education institutions has increased by only nine per cent since the introduction of the dispersed studies policy, while the number of students has increased by 27% for the same period (Popovski 2010),. Reflecting on the *disperzirani studii*, Azizi (2012: 63) suggests that 'for a small country like North Macedonia, these measures are estimated to have more political effect, which consists in prolonging the demands of citizens for employment while they study'. In other words, the function of the dispersion seems to be primarily political, and serves the purpose of a temporary postponement (absorption) of youth unemployment.

At present, the Macedonian higher education system currently comprises 21 universities (6 public and 15 private institutions). Although the number of private institutions exceeds the number of public ones, the large majority of students (85%) are enrolled in the six public universities; while the remaining 15% attend one of the private universities. In this respect, public universities are mass and are characterised by large volumes of students, while private universities are small-scale organisations enrolling up to several hundred students.

Avoiding the proliferation of tertiary education institutions is one of the challenges that most countries with a small population face, and North Macedonia seems to be no exception. In terms of the overall size of the system, Table 4 provides some elements of benchmarking in that respect, by showing the number of public and private universities in a number of former

[7] Eventually, several dispersed study programmes had to be closed down, as not a single student showed interest in enrolling. Popovski (2010) cites a newspaper article from 2008 which states that out of 58 dispersed study programmes, for 33 of them (nearly 60%) no candidates applied, showing in his view the inability of the state to foresee students' interest levels.

socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as two non-former communist but small countries in Northern Europe.

Table 4. Country population and number of universities (2017)

Country	Population (Million)	Public Universities	Private Universities
Armenia	3.133	16	40
Azerbaijan	9.750	19	7
Croatia	4.361	8	3
Denmark	5.627	7	0
Finland	5.450	14	0
Georgia	4.225	17	28
Kazakhstan	16.886	43	73
Kyrgyzstan	5.627	33	21
North Macedonia	***2.073***	***6***	***15***
Slovenia	2.053	3	22

Source: World Population Atlas, European Commission Tempus Program (cf. The World Bank 2016)

What one can see from Table 4 is that the number of universities in North Macedonia appears quite reasonable in relation to the size of the population: however, as discussed earlier, the large number of private institutions and the unwarranted growth of public institutions in the last decade may represent an efficacy and quality concern for the system.

In terms of student enrolment, numbers have also increased rapidly in recent years, from a 28% gross enrolment ratio in 2004 to 53% in 2020 (SSORM 2020, online). This was achieved through a combination of Government interventions to increase enrolment in the public institutions (via the satellite campuses), and the growth of private higher education providers.

However, the enrolment rate has been rather stagnant over the last few years, which has posed financial challenges for institutions as they rely heavily upon tuition fees.

Table 2. Student gross enrolment rate (2004-2020)

2004-05	2011-12	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
28%	44%	58%	59%	57%	54%	53%

Source: State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia (2020)

3. The academic landscape: figures and structure

North Macedonia has a relatively small academic community. Based on the latest official statistics from 2019 (SSORM 2020), the total number of academics working in Macedonian universities is about 4,500. But the real number of academics can be estimated to be between 6000 and 7000, as there is some uncertainty about the reliability of the data if we take into consideration that short-term contracts are not calculated into the official figure. In terms of institutional distribution, 80% work in public institutions while 20% working in private universities.

The total number of academics has increased over the last decade, however, this has not been proportional to the increase in the number of students. The student-teacher ratio has in fact worsened, from 12:1 in 2011 to 16:1 in 2019. Further, official figures suggest that almost half of senior professors are over 50, signalling that a large proportion of the academic population is approaching retirement (SSORM 2020).

Early career academics (Assistants and Docents) represented only 29% of the academic profession in 2019 (SSORM 2020), and their number has declined from 33% in 2011. In the private sector, the decline of early career staff has been directly connected with the shrinking

number of students enrolling in these universities, which has created significant budgetary constraints. In the public sector, the decline of younger academics has been significantly impacted by the reduced number of new openings granted by the Government. A recently-published report on the academic capacities of public universities in North Macedonia shows that all of them are facing a large shortage of staff which jeopardises their ability to operate normally (Stevanovikj et al. 2019). For instance, it is noted that out of 28 Faculty units at the University of Skopje, eight of them work without Assistants. The same is true for the University of Bitola where out of 14 Faculty units, six are currently operating without a single Assistant as well.

In the past, one of the main ways in which new positions were made available in public institutions was by the retirement of senior staff; for each retired professor, one or two new junior positions were typically opened. But in recent years this unwritten rule has been dismissed. Today it is not uncommon for a professor to retire without a new spot being opened as a replacement. This situation has drastically increased the work burden on the already limited number of academic staff, regardless of age. Due to lack of staff, seniors who plan to retire are sometimes asked to stay longer in order to fill the gap.

Another relevant question pertains to the model upon which new academic posts are financed. In the public sector, the recruitment is controlled by the State through the Ministry of Finance, which must provide approval for each new position. In the private sector, however, institutions are left to develop their own recruitment strategy and to freely dispense their funding in the way they wish to.

Continuing the former-Yugoslav legacy, most academics (89%) are working full time (SSORM 2020). Part-time positions are an exception, and are more common with private providers. However, even among private universities, the percentage of part-time positions has decreased in recent years. While in the past private universities relied on borrowed staff from public universities, they now increasingly offer full-time positions to academics (in most cases seniors) who have previously worked for public universities. This has been done in an effort to try and achieve greater prestige and competitive advantage in terms of cadre. Many academics from the public sector have received significant financial incentives to transfer to private universities – a pressure that many public universities have not been able to counter. However, the decreasing number of students enrolling in private institutions has reduced the possibility of these institutions to use monetary incentives in convincing academics to transfer.

Since 2010, the right to work at another higher education institution has been regulated by the Law on Higher Education, limiting the share of additional work to less than 30% of the volume defined by the Decree of Norms and Standards. Some universities have adopted their own competition clauses which oblige academics to secure permission from their Deans or Rectors to undertake additional activity outside the institution of their primary employment. Fewer restrictions on earning additional income are visible at institutions with low salary levels, where such a practice is considered a way to keep academics in their home institutions.

In a media statement in 2008, the Rector of the University of Skopje announced a zero-tolerance policy regarding those members of the academic staff hiding additional income gained outside the remit of the university. The introduction of such a measure sought to end, in the first instance, the practice by which junior staff members conduct most of the teaching workload, while, in the Rectors' words, ‘senior professors are nowhere to be found’ (Utrinski

Vesnik 2008, online). The reaction came after the results of an internal survey which revealed that more than 150 academics combine employment at the university with additional employment at another university. Part of the reason why additional employment is now less tolerated in many institutions may be due to the fact that the income generated from additional work in most cases goes entirely to the individual seeking additional employment, while the universities do not usually benefit from this.

In terms of earning, unlike senior professors who can choose to earn additional income by working full-time at a public institution and part-time at a private one, such moonlighting (i.e. supplementary employment) is rare amongst ECAs as they are not viewed as carrying sufficient cachet. Financially speaking, it is difficult to say if academic salaries are good enough to allow a middle-class lifestyle. Certainly, many senior professors may enjoy an upper-class lifestyle, especially if they teach at several universities, but this is not always the case, and certainly not the case for ECAs who typically work many years for salaries below the national overall average of 350 Euros. Given that starting salary levels are low (roughly 200-250 Euros in both private and public universities), recruiting the most talented graduates to join the academy is becoming increasingly difficult, especially in areas such as computer science and engineering where starting salaries in the private sector are far greater than in academia. Further, academic salary increase is not tied to any criteria of productivity, but rather, to seniority. This structural deficiency is preventing universities from rewarding those who perform exceptionally well, which may ultimately reduce the motivation among staff and the overall attractiveness of the academic profession.

Given the focus on teaching within universities, salary levels are typically defined by teaching hours, with in many cases the sole duty of academics being teaching. ‘Unofficially, up to 85%

of state funding goes to cover basic costs for institutions and academic salaries' (Stich et al. 2011: 26), a situation which leaves very little funding for capital investments or infrastructure projects. Involvement in research is not used to calculate the salary coefficient despite the promotion system being directed at research productivity and the fact that in order to gain promotion, academics must now publish several articles in international journals.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the academic career structure within the system. The Law on Higher Education distinguishes between four career stages: Assistant, Docent, Associate Professor and Full Professor. Assistant and Docent positions are considered to fall under the early career stage. Assistants are typically hired with a Master's degree and then do a PhD while they are employed at the university. The Law on Higher Education now requires Assistants to complete their PhD within five years in order to be allowed to apply for a Docent position, otherwise their contract is automatically terminated. Earning a Docent position requires a completed PhD and four articles published in international journals (defined as having an editorial board from at least four different countries).

4. Higher education governance: system and institutional level

System level: the state as an architect of higher education reforms

While in some higher education systems across Europe the state is gradually backing away from its direct role as creator of policy (at least in the traditional top-down sense), in North Macedonia the State (i.e., the Government) is inarguably the prime architect and dominant voice that details the intensity and direction of reform. Its authority over and impact on higher education has been an enduring aspect since communist times, and has remained so until the present. As I have argued elsewhere (Galevski and Mihut 2014; Galevski 2014c), higher

education in North Macedonia falls close to the ‘sovereign state steering model’ as defined by Gornitzka and Maassen (2000), given that the system is under tight control by and close jurisdiction of State political authorities. My quantitative work on the academic profession in North Macedonia (Galevski 2014b) points in the same direction. The findings suggest that the Government’s steering role is strongly evident: 71% of the 487 surveyed academics perceived that the extent of influence of the Government in the sector is high or very high.

In the absence of additional public resources that could be used as incentives, the State has relied primarily on regulatory measures to influence the behaviour of the universities. For instance, the current Law on Higher Education that came into force in 2008 has been modified seventeen times, with over 180 amendments (most of which have been adding more and more detail) in just over a decade. As in other domains of public policy, the amendments made typically reflect the ruling party’s interest rather than the interest of those subjected to the regulations. The changes laid down are usually introduced at short notice, with little public consultation and no period for adjustment.

Most of the articles in the Law denote obligations rather than rights. In the 96-page long text, the prescriptiveness of the Law is clearly evident if one looks at the vocabulary used. The document uses phrases such as ‘must meet’, ‘have/has to comply’, and so on, appearing incontestably authoritative, and requiring passive acceptance; instead of, for instance, forming regulations in ways that would allow for more flexibility by using modal verbs such as ‘can’, ‘may’, ‘might’ and so on. Moreover, the prescriptiveness seems to convey an underlying negative assumption held by the State that universities are ‘untrustworthy’ which if not regulated in detail would be ‘slacking off’ – which as I explain below is actually not an entirely unlikely scenario.

An additional problem is that, as happens in almost all former Yugoslav republics (and arguably other places), each Government has its own agenda and priorities not necessarily aligned with the overall objectives outlined in the legislation or strategic documents. This often seriously hampers the transformation of the higher education system and the improvement of its performance. At the same time, as anywhere else it is much easier for political parties to offer a populist (higher) education platform - which either promises too much, or plays to the wishes of the academic community to assure an absence of revolt - rather than a program of reforms that might challenge established practices and vested interests.

Some state reform initiatives have obviously been well-intentioned, but still ended up as failed efforts. As observers have noted, a major reason for this is that reforms are often created on the fly and without a clear road map for implementation (Kreceva 2008; Popovski 2010; Stevanovikj et al. 2019). In this respect, the system appears to be run by everyday politics rather than according to strategic documents. Adding insult to injury is the short-lived leadership within the Ministry of Education, which changes so often that even the slightest institutional memory or consistency in reform tends to get lost along the way. Over the last decade, nine different Ministers have taken the position, on average barely staying in power for more than 12 months.

Finally, a major risk is that the influence of politics often becomes visible regarding the way institutions are governed, or more precisely, by whom they are governed. Anecdotally, there have been frequent accusations in the public, and within universities, that it is political parties that decide who the next university Rector or Dean will be – or at least, that it is much easier

to be a successful candidate if you are backed up by a political party. In this respect, politics reduce the legitimacy of the candidates and the democratic nature of the election process.

Institutional governance: a defensive logic of the status quo

The high intensity of reforms and the considerable degree of state interference have reinforced a defensive logic vis-à-vis the status quo from universities, regardless of whether or not this always serves the best long-term interests of their institutions. While there are clear signs of why opposition to reform is justifiable under the current levels of state intervention, institutions have often created absurd forms of resentment and have prevented a level of desirable change - for instance, having institutions externally evaluated by ENQA or having fiscal year budgets published online. In much too simple a way, universities grasp onto the concepts of institutional autonomy and academic freedom but without acknowledging a duty of accountability – which according to Berdahl (1990) is inescapably linked to these concepts. In fact, the rhetorically strong reference to autonomy and freedom is often used as a 'joker card' and a leading mantra to cover up institutional shortcomings and the growing incapacity of Macedonian universities to adapt to new conditions.

Part of what protects the status quo is that, as a continuation of the previous communist legacy, institutional governance is still characterised by a peer-driven model of collegial self-governance where the senior 'academic oligarchy' remains the most important actor within internal governance (Galevski 2014). In fact, all positions of administrative and budgetary power are held by senior members of the academic guild – which arguably puts them in a position to protect their best interests. The voice of ECAs is only partially represented, with Docents having a right to participate in the work of some decision-making bodies and to get elected for positions of power (though this rarely happens at this career stage). Assistants and

other ECAs below the Docent position are excluded from any influence and representation, both at Faculty and University level.

In this respect, the protective view concerning the status quo can also be seen as a way for senior academics to maintain their privileges and to conceal a number of personal interests. As Czaplinski (2008: 115-116) notes:

> the Macedonian education system, in particular at the higher level, is ossified due to the conservatism of its academics. Indeed, any attempts for reforms quite often met opposition among those who might lose benefits which the current non-transparent system offers. It mainly concerns the academic establishment, whose members hold many positions and receive many salaries…local professors were prepared to conduct necessary reforms only as long as their interests were not affected.

The involvement of external stakeholders in institutional decision-making is extremely limited, and none of the chief governing bodies include external representation. This contrasts starkly with an increasing number of European institutions where, with the rise of new stakes in higher education, new (non-traditional) stakeholders have gradually penetrated into the institutional decision-making arena. These most typically include - but are not necessarily limited to - representatives from the business and the public sector (e.g., local Government) as well as the local community (for example through alumni associations).

The underlying rationale for the exclusion of external representation is based on the premise that academic employees can, better than anybody from the outside, represent the interest of the institution and decide upon its future direction. Inasmuch as this might be correct in theory, the problem however arises when academics are expected to vote for proposals that might be in the best interest of the institution, while not in the interest of the individuals (i.e. senior academics) elected to the decision-making bodies. In other words, again, it seems to be the case

that individual interest almost always overrides the collective one – and often without any awareness of the consequences that such decisions carry.

Rectors are the face of institutions, but it is arguably Deans that hold most of the governing power. This means that central issues of governance are decided at the Faculty rather than University level. In this respect, universities (particularly public ones) can be considered as a weak conglomerate that provide a common name to highly independent Faculties. According to Turajlic (2006), the rationale behind the model of universities as loose associations of Faculties was developed in the 1950s by the socialist Government in order to prevent Faculties from banding together and mounting any serious protest against the communist regime. Another explanation could be that well-earning units are not ready to give up their income to help financially weaker units.

Hence, despite increased pressures from the Government to form more strategically governed institutions, in practice, the fragmented structure (typical of public universities) is still visible in many areas (for example, finances and academic matters). The main problems seem to be: the difficulty in uprooting the historical legacy of relatively independent and self-standing Faculties; the many vested interests of senior academics (at Faculty and University level) contributing to the lack of motive for more substantial change; and the unwillingness (and perhaps lack of solidarity) of Faculties to share their funds with other units. In such a setting, it seems hard to predict what sort of developments will take place in the foreseeable future.

Financing of higher education and research: unpredictable and insufficient

The financing of higher education is another issue worth analysing. Public investment[8] in education is 3.5% of the GDP, which is significantly less than other countries in the CEE region or the EU average (Dolenec et al. 2014). In 2009, in the midst of the global economic crisis, budgetary allocations for higher education were at around 1.3% of the GDP, but they have now been reduced to about 0.8% (Stevanovikj et al. 2019) - which speaks to a continued erosion of the public-good aspect of higher education in the country. In consequence, the ambitious expansion of the higher education system has taken place with shrinking public investment, and reform efforts have been introduced by the Government without taking into account their financial implications. Under such circumstances, the success of these initiatives has been structurally jeopardised.

A front-line concern connected to the funding of higher education is the outdated model currently in use. The current model was established in 1988 - when the characteristics of the higher education system were drastically different from the ones we have today. Apart from being outdated, this model is full of ambiguities and prone to changes. The criteria of how funding is distributed between universities depends on what is considered to be in the public interest by the Government at that moment. The priorities often change quickly which makes public funding unpredictable and arbitrary (Stevanovikj et al. 2019). As Stich et al. (2011: 29) note in their report on higher education funding in North Macedonia:

> A major problem for the universities results from the instability of public budgets. It is not always clear if the allocations documented in the state budget will really be financially feasible and transferred to universities. Sometimes it remains unclear for a substantial part of the year how large public funding will

[8] Data on the private share of investment is not available.

be in the end and sometimes state allocations are transferred rather late in the year.

Following the amendments made to the Law on Higher Education in 2003, private universities are allowed to compete for State funding, however, in practice, they rarely receive any support from public sources. As a result, they are mostly self-financed and rely heavily upon tuitions fees (between 80-90%) for most of their revenue, with some additional income coming from projects and donations. In order to ensure their financial sustainability, private universities often opt to increase enrolment rates by lowering criteria for admission and academic requirements. It is worth mentioning, however, that over-enrolment and lowering criteria is not an uncommon practice at public higher education as well, as they also enrol a significant number of fee-paying students in addition to students who study for free as part of the state quota.

Another relevant question pertains to the available funding for research. With a share of 0.44%[9] of the GDP (much below the current EU average of 2.06%), 'North Macedonia may be said to have public research investment of negligible size' (Dolenec et al. 2014: 78). As a result, universities lack the necessary infrastructure and resources (buildings, laboratories, qualified personnel) to improve research quality. Although the National Innovation Strategy from 2012 sets a rather ambitious target of 1.8% GDP investment in research by 2020, the current investment levels has left no room for optimism that the target will be achieved as planned. The disappointingly low financial capacity for research is identified as 'an important factor driving brain-drain' in the country (Dolenec et al. 2014: 79).

[9] This share of the GDP comes almost entirely from public sources.

The problem with insufficient research funding has been noted in several EU Progress Reports on North Macedonia. The 2012 report states that despite some progress as regards legislative developments, 'financial resources are limited and the capacities of the research facilities remain weak' (European Commission 2012: 59). A more recent version of the report from 2016 notes that 'greater efforts are needed, in particular on the level of investment and strengthening the capacity at national level by increasing the number of scientists and modernising infrastructure for research' (European Commission 2016: 64). The report from 2019 observes that 'the country's annual participation in and funding received from the Horizon 2020 programme is of concern, as 2018 figures are far below expectations. The Horizon 2020 success rate remained somewhat low at 11.2% (compared with a 15.3% average overall success rate)' (European Commission 2019: 84).

5. The international arena: the colonisation effect of European initiatives and their domestic mutation

Bologna as a leverage to legitimise domestic reforms

Gornitzka (2006: 19) notes that 'few national higher education systems or policies can claim to operate in total isolation from the international environment'. Macedonian higher education is no exception, 'though historically this was not the case' (Dolenec et al. 2014: 62). Over the last two decades, (pan-)European initiatives such as the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy and its policy successors (such as the Modernization Agenda and Horizon 2020) have all been looked at domestically for guidance and inspiration under the rhetoric of avoiding being left behind 'resulting in the need for catching up with the EU' (Galevski 2013b: 13).

North Macedonia formally joined the Bologna Process in 2003, which can be seen as the entry point of Macedonian higher education into the European Higher Education Area. Even though the implementation of Bologna-inspired reforms is not a formal requirement in the process of North Macedonia's EU accession, it has been perceived as 'a guiding principle' (Stojanov and Angeloska 2006: 52) and as a necessary adjustment for 'reintegration into Europe' (Zgaga et al. 2013: 16). However, the desire to 'Europeanise' the system overnight has mostly resulted in surface-level cosmetic changes to the extent of 'Bologna becoming a theoretical exercise' (Kwiek 2007: 89).

Reports on the implementation of the Bologna process in North Macedonia show that much has been accomplished on the level of formal adaptation through legislation, but far less on a practical implementation level (Dolenec et al. 2014). Petkovska (2011) argues that there is a significant mismatch between what is foreseen through legislation and what North Macedonia universities seem to be able to actually do. In part, as Tomusk (2004) notes in a broader context, this has been a consequence of the failure of the Bologna Process to address the different starting points of signature countries, the diversity of the systems both in terms of historical and cultural background, as well as the financial and institutional resources necessary for implementation. For instance, Bologna has dealt primarily with reform issues in the public higher education sector, remaining indifferent to the fact that the private sector represents a significant share of higher education within many CEE countries, including North Macedonia.

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 (2013: 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’. Vukasović (2014: 24) claims that the fact that ‘no ministerial summits or official Bologna seminars have been organised in the Western Balkan region’ is a rather clear sign that these countries have not been major influencers in agenda-setting.

An additional problem is that some of the Bologna objectives are marked by ambiguity and permeability or even contradictory interpretations. As a result, once they enter the national policy arena, the Macedonian Government uses them as a leverage to legitimate particular domestic reforms, rather than as a means to bring Macedonian higher education closer to other European higher education systems. Bearing this in mind, much of the criticism attributed to the Bologna Process in the country may be in fact interpreted as criticism of domestic higher education policy actors and their attempt to justify domestic policy preferences which clearly fall outside of the boundaries of Bologna and its objectives.

Quality assurance mechanisms: a refusal to talk about quality

Macedonian higher education has a rather short history of quality assurance. Unlike many Western European countries where universities have dealt with this issue since the beginning of the 1980s (Harvey and Green 1993), in North Macedonia the development of quality assurance mechanisms has been slow and far from representing a reliable instrument for assessing the quality of the system. The first major policy connected to quality assurance was introduced only in 2008 with the establishment of the Agency for Quality and Accreditation in the provision of the Law on Higher Education. However, more than a decade later, the Agency still remains to be constituted and activated. In this respect a quality system has not managed

to establish itself as an integral element in the work of higher education institutions and the state bodies competent for quality assurance.

While in other parts of the world the problem seems to be the increasingly pervasive use of quality assurance mechanisms (Collini 2012), in North Macedonia the problem is the exact opposite: a complete lack of any meaningful quality assurance standards that would serve as tools to protect minimum standards. Even though the massive expansion of the number of institutions over the last two decades has created a perception of declining quality, no serious steps have been taken to tackle this problem. As in other policy areas, quality assurance mechanisms have been developed without any real motive to implement them and the process of their development, particularly in regard to the inclusivity of the process, is also questionable.

The few existing forms of quality assurance have been mostly declarative in nature, either in order to meet mandatory legislative criteria or to be shown to external evaluators during site-visits. Proof of this can be found in recent evaluation reports on several Macedonian universities conducted by the European University Association (EUA). For instance, in one of them, the evaluation team noted that from the self-evaluation report it was 'unclear whether these [the document provided for the evaluation] had been written for the report or came from formal approved University documents' (EUA 2017: 5).

The lack of quality assurance mechanisms provides universities with a considerable, and arguably unhealthy, degree of flexibility. Many issues seem to be discussed and even decided in an informal setting. An example of this is how student course evaluations are managed and what impact they have. Even though they are one of the few quality assurance mechanisms

used, as Azizi (2012) notes, they are inconsistently used and not given due weight. Even if a professor gets poorly rated by an entire year group of students, it is unlikely that repercussions will follow.

University rankings: a global tool for a local purpose

Undoubtedly, university rankings of all kinds have become a significant component of the higher education landscape both globally and locally, despite the various and in many cases relevant criticisms about their validity and meaningfulness (a discussion that is beyond the scope of this study). In recent years, the interest in rankings has continued to grow and has expanded to many parts of the world, a clear sign that rankings are no longer a concern only for small number of elite systems of higher education, principally those in Anglophone and Western European countries (Dill and Soo 2005; Hazelkorn 2017).

In the CEE region, despite differences in approaches and actual results, several countries like Russia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia - among many others – have launched national ranking initiatives and/or policy instruments to make their institutions part of international rankings. As Steriglov (2015) notes, the results have so far been very modest, as the entire former communist bloc of countries performs rather poorly in all popular global rankings. The Moscow State University is the only university that occasionally makes it to the top 100. Most other universities from the CEE region that do get into the different rankings are usually found at the lower end of the table, almost all of them below 500. To date, no Macedonian university has ever managed to get listed in the leading global rankings due to a number of structural reasons (I return to this later).

As the impact of rankings has been felt worldwide, this has been the case no less for North Macedonia. A common question raised each year, as the results of international rankings appear in the media, is how a Macedonian university might become part of one. Towards this goal, since 2012, North Macedonia has introduced a bi-annual national institutional ranking commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Science. The ranking, at least on paper, has two different purposes. Internally, its aim is to increase the quality and transparency of higher education institutions, to give information to prospective students so that they might make a more informed choice regarding their place of studies, as well as to inform policy makers and the broader public of the actual performance of Macedonian higher education. Externally, as the Minister of Education has pointed out in a media statement, it is intended 'to bring Macedonian higher education closer to the league of world-class universities and ultimately to have at least one university making its way into the best 500 universities in the world' (Vecer magazine 2012, online).

The introduction of the national ranking has been accompanied by a series of problems and objections. One of them concerns the validity of the indicators considered. These have been changed each time the ranking was conducted, making any attempt at comparative analysis with the results of the previous ranking almost impossible. Moreover, the ranking does little to help understand the relative standing of Macedonian institutions in comparison to those listed in the ARWU, as the indicators used are tailored to the local context (i.e., they are focused more on teaching than on research). It is hence rather unclear how the ranking can be used as an estimate for the world-standing of universities within the country. Another major problem is connected to the fact that the ranking relies solely on self-reported data. As no instruments are used to verify and check the information provided by institutions, a legitimate concern is

whether institutions engage in ‘gaming’ the rankings in order to simply improve their standing, rather than conducting genuine self-reflection.

Methodological inconsistencies aside, the purpose of the ranking itself seems to be the biggest problem. Bearing in mind the substantial differences in the size, funding and capacity for research and teaching of universities, as well as the years of operation, the ranking does not reveal much that could not be gathered without it. To little surprise, the oldest public universities have taken top spots each time, with only one private university usually making it into the top five.

So what is then the purpose of this ranking? While officially, the goal of the Ministry was to initiate a national ranking of universities that could be read simply in educational terms, unofficially one could possibly argue that it has served as an instrument of power and a ‘tool to restore order’ (Branković 2012, online), rather than serving strictly as a measurement of quality. It can be suspected that when launching the project, the Ministry hoped rankings would lead to a significant transfer of students from private institutions to the newly-opened public universities. Considering this understanding, the ranking appears to be a political weapon used by the Government to label private institutions as worse than public ones. This raises the question of whether the ranking has been introduced to actually measure quality, or simply to create a national perception of quality, status and reputation.

The controversies surrounding the university rankings have further contributed towards the politicisation of the issue of quality and the perception that some of the newest public universities are clearly favoured by the Government. Concerning the first ranking in 2012, the preliminary list published on the Ministry’s web page did not correspond to the final list

published on Jiao Tong's web page several days later. The main difference concerned the standing of several private universities appearing lower on the final ranking compared to the preliminary one. The inconsistency was attributed to a technical mistake, however, many institutions voiced their concern about a potential 'calibration' of the results by the Ministry. In this respect, since its initiation, the ranking has been in large part surrounded by suspicion that has impaired the trust of future students concerning its credibility, thereby devaluing one of the main official purposes of why it was initiated in the first place.

Despite the ranking being heavily criticised, universities are increasingly paying attention to their relative position against other institutions in the national ranking. In this context there is some pressure to do well in it, given that it does attract national media interest and can potentially influence the decision made by prospective students. With the advent of the national ranking, the global university rankings have increased in importance as well. They are beginning to impact on public policy, as demonstrated by several policies introduced by the Macedonian Government. Namely, preferential treatment is given to the recognition of foreign diplomas and qualifications acquired in the top 500 universities in the ARWU ranking, while those with qualifications from the rest must go through a highly bureaucratic process. The Government also introduced a special scholarship fund for postgraduate students going to a university ranked in the top 500 universities on the ARWU ranking. This is clear evidence that the Government is taking the top 500 list as a reliable source and as a quality standard.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, North Macedonia is still waiting to see one of its institutions finding its spot in one of the major international rankings. There are a number of structural reasons for this situation. The key issue appears to be the marginal research output of Macedonian universities, which accounts for the bulk of scoring in almost all global rankings.

The fact that Macedonian higher education suffers from a considerable lack of money and international talent that might push its universities up in the rankings is another limitation. To some degree, these challenges could potentially be overcome through a strategic process, whereby the country's leading universities would receive additional funding and resources to improve their global visibility and standing. However, as Hazelkorn (2017) warns with illustrative examples from the US, a slavish pursuit of rankings can lead to a university abandoning its mission, and ultimately rising in the rankings (even by a few spots) can be a very costly and lengthy process. In a somewhat lighter vein Birnbaum (2007) suggests that world class universities can only be built if they are firmly grounded in strong and indigenous educational and social foundations.

The initiation of a strategic process, if so desired, would most likely require a departure from the present policy of national rankings, which is currently more about the assessment of quality at the local level than about building an international reputation for Macedonian universities and benchmarking them against the worlds' leading institutions. Examples from (ex-)communist countries around the world, such as Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and China, among others, show that it is possible for such countries to get some universities within these rankings – though it would be fair to say again that it will be quite challenging for a small country like North Macedonia, with limited capacity to achieve the same success as these bigger players.

6. Conclusions

Drawing on previous research, this chapter has shown that the Macedonian higher education sector is confronted with multiple pressures and challenges. The abrupt growth over the last twenty years, both in the private and public domain, has clearly raised many quality and

efficacy concerns for the sector, and has put in question its long-term sustainability. The main disadvantage is that the expansion of the sector has not seemed to come hand in hand with the several necessary conditions for the effective operation of higher education institutions. These include sustainable financing (especially for research), favourable governance at both the system and institutional level, supportive quality assurance mechanisms, and a large enough pool of academics to support growth and innovation.

One of the gravest and most obvious systemic obstacles seems to be the extent of state (i.e. political) intervention in the system and the many sudden, unexpected and poorly planned Government-initiated reforms that have been introduced over the previous decades. The Government is clearly 'calling the shots', and plays a central role in steering higher education; typically doing so by way of introducing top-down reforms, by a flood of new, worrisome and ever-changing legislative interventions, and other methods (such as funding). Each time a new Government is elected, the script and rules as to how higher education should be developed are reshuffled in a flash. In such a setting, characterised by abrupt shifts and chaotic changes, it seems hard to predict what sort of developments will take place in the foreseeable future. How this might impact the management of institutions and the careers of ECAs is addressed in the analytical chapters of this thesis.

While the political influence over higher education is evidently strong, and potentially very harmful to the Macedonian higher education sector, it would be unjustified to claim that the dominant position of the state is not connected to the way institutions behave. Universities' refusal to change or to show even minimal progress is likely to have led to a situation in which a solution through political means may be the only possible option seen by authorities. One could safely argue that universities have often done too little, too late to protect themselves

from political interference. Such a situation has been effectively used by political authorities to leverage power over higher education and to make it a fruitful ground for political intervention. This means that the protective interest of universities is to some extent the enabling factor that has made high political interference possible.

In this context, failings at the institutional level should not to be ignored. Universities have surely played their own role in holding back the progress of higher education in the country. Protecting the status quo remains the fundamental impulse of universities, and its maintenance is on the way to becoming an end in itself. Enthusiasm for reforms is usually minimal – and rarely goes beyond what is officially required by the State. At a time when multiple changes and reforms have been imposed by the Government, this tendency to resist change by universities might be conceived as a progressive force aimed at protecting the system and assuring some level of stability. However, a danger and regrettable effect present here is that universities can easily fall into inertia and retreat from reforming themselves. So, unless change is driven by an external force (i.e., by the Government), change is unlikely to happen.

Under the rhetoric of needing to catch up with more developed countries, both the Government and universities have frequently looked to the (Pan)-European level for guidance and inspiration. However, these initiatives have not been as successful as is often hoped for. International policies and ideas are often misplaced, alternated and misinterpreted domestically. The fact that the European Union higher education policy agenda lacks a strong normative foundation and stricter assessment in this area for potential EU candidate members such as North Macedonia has left domestic actors to choose on their own what is right and appropriate. The overall outcome is often further separation from these standards, pushing Macedonian higher education further into isolation. Whether this makes Macedonian ECAs

second-grade citizens within the growing ‘internationalisation’ of academic work is something that is addressed later in this thesis.

While efforts to come closer to Western European standards have showed limited success, the system is by no means immune to global trends. The rising number of students, the diversification of higher education providers 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 attack’ (Levin et al. 2020) on the lives of academics; however, as the remaining chapters of this thesis show, a complete absence of such mechanisms may well be equally detrimental.

Concerning these debates, the next three analytical chapters of this thesis provide a reflection on some of the issues from the perspectives of UAs, as the people that manage universities (Chapter 6), and of ECAs, as people that have recently joined the academic sector (Chapters 7 and 8). What also comes to the forefront are the advantages and limitations that recent changes present to the academic profession.

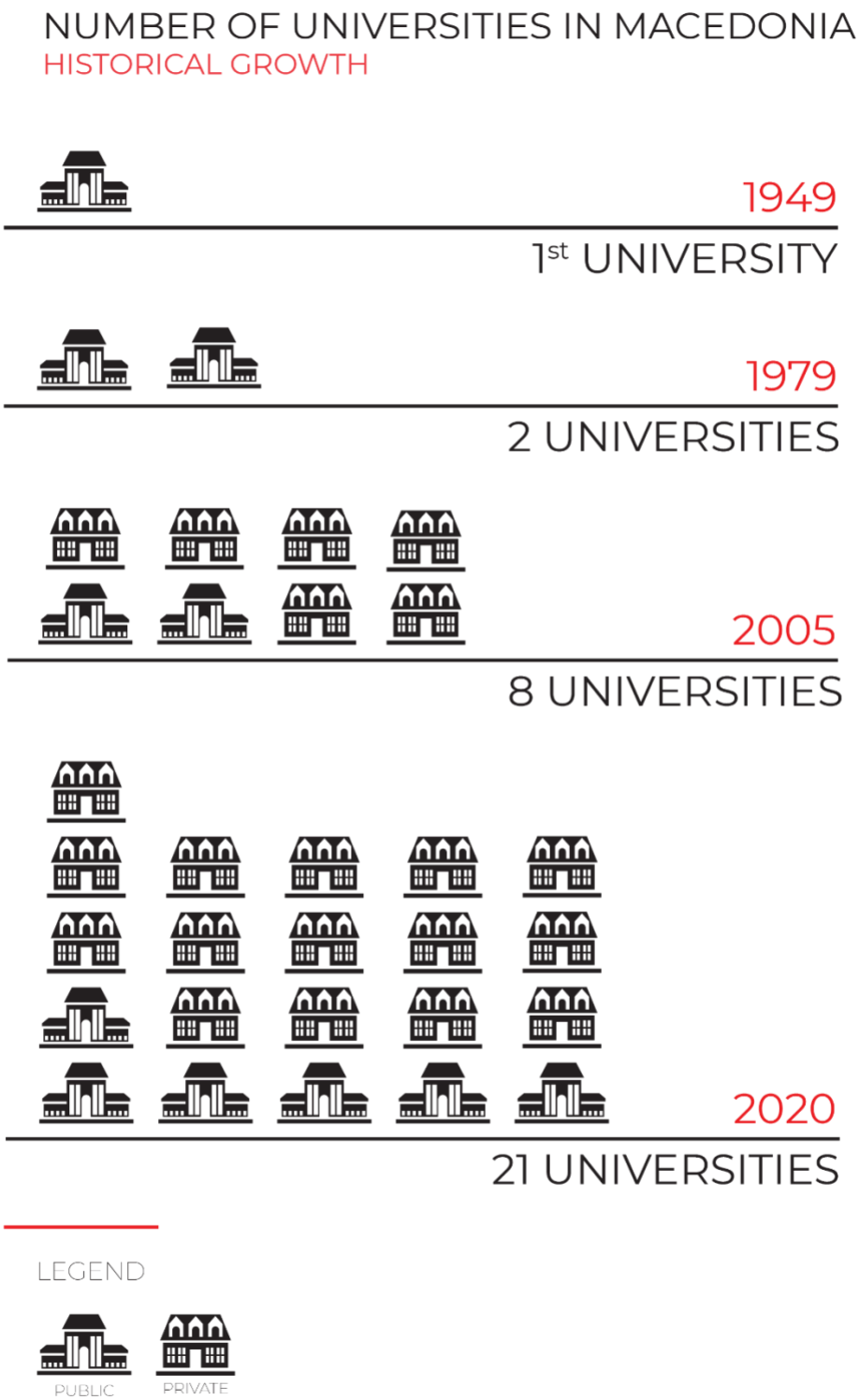


Figure 2 Number of Universities in North Macedonia – Historical Growth

CHAPTER 6

THE VIEWS OF UAs ON THE SITUATION WITHIN THE MACEDONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

1. Introduction

Considering the under-researched nature of Macedonian higher education, this chapter aims to generate a deeper understanding of the situation in the sector based on the insights shared by the people that hold key managerial positions at the institutional level. The source of evidence on which I draw here is based upon the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 15 University Administrators (UAs) who held various institutional roles of leadership, including the positions of Rector, Vice-Rector, Dean, Vice-Dean, Member of the Senate, and other positions. The UAs whom I interviewed were selected from the same four institutions from which ECA participants were recruited. In each institution at least three UAs were interviewed.

Being involved in leadership roles, the accounts of UAs are intended to provide additional insight into areas where very little can be grasped from official documents or from the available research studies on higher education previously conducted in the country. It is important, however, to highlight that UAs, considering their role and institutional positionality, are likely to have their own background assumptions, preferences, and interests, as well as very different personal investments in, and perspectives on, higher education from what ECAs might have. So it is imperative to remember that while UAs provide a valuable insight into the Macedonian higher education landscape they are not necessarily speaking for ECAs, though the situation of ECAs cannot be simply or straightforwardly read from their own perceptions only. In the closing chapter of my thesis (Chapter 9), I return to this issue, and explore the possible

similarities and gaps in views between the UAs and ECAs that I interviewed, and how this impacts on our understanding of Macedonian academia.

In the following subsections, drawing upon the interviews with UAs, I cover a number of issues. In Section 2 I briefly reflect on UAs' views on the communist past and whether, from today's perceptive, it should be looked at as a burden or as a positive heritage for Macedonian higher education. In Section 3, I explore the opinions of UAs on issues of system and institutional governance, specifically their perception of the role of the State, as well as their own role as institutional leaders. In Section 4 and Section 5, from a human resource perspective, I address how UAs see the prospects for recruiting, promoting and retaining ECAs, as well as the everyday work arrangements in their institutions. In Section 5, I look at how UAs in Section 5, in light of the findings, I offer several conclusions.

2. The communist past and academia: a burden for some, a positive heritage for others

Discussion on the communist past fleshed out some of the sharpest divisions of opinion and strongest feelings among UAs. During the interviews, especially those with administrators who had work experience within academia lasting several decades, in choosing to discuss the past, remembered stories and nostalgic memories became quite evident, and had a prominent place in their descriptions. In general, this concerned the story of the idealised past and of a good tradition that was perceived as having been built largely during communist times - which was in itself was frequently referred as the 'golden era' of higher education in North Macedonia. According to these accounts, the past was generally regarded as much better and more favourable than the present, and for some as irretrievably lost.

With regards to the academic profession, there was a longing for a long-gone past when careers were smoother and more stable, when many new job openings were made, and when work within academia was much more respected and offered more perspectives than academic positions today. If we follow Ylijoki's (2005: 555) work on nostalgic narratives in academic settings, these retrospective stories are not simply describing 'the actual past but rather the problems and tensions of the present'. Interpreted in this way, these nostalgic stories should not only be read in connection with grand narratives of a lost paradise, but as showing a deep sense of loss from a present standpoint. In other words, nostalgia is a state arising out of present conditions as much as out of the past itself. Take the following examples of the function that nostalgia played for UAs in describing the current state of academic life, and the tension between the old and the new:

> At the beginning of the 80s when I started working here, it still used to be quite prestigious to be an academic...This has changed since. Nowadays, I must say with regret that this image has not been preserved, partly due to our own fault, but also due to a major political attack on the profession. (UA_5)

> We had time to read and think in peace. It was a much more laid-back approach. (UA_7)

> When I was doing my doctorate in Yugoslavia, I was able to do my dissertation with the help of professors from Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana. Today there is absolutely no room for such a thing. (UA_2)

These nostalgic stories, however, depart from those reported in Ylijoki's (2005) study in one important aspect. From a more political standpoint, they offer not only an indication of the present, but indirectly function as an explanation (or perhaps justification) for privileging policy continuity rather than policy change. Nostalgia in this sense served as a resource through which UAs were trying to defend a past heritage, to construct continuity and to resist current

pressures and reorientations in the policy arena. Put simply, nostalgia can thus be seen as a subtle strategy to resist change. This is illustrated quite clearly by the insights offer by one UA:

> The communist past is a cornerstone of Macedonian academia and in my opinion we should stand solidly in line with this tradition…Ignoring our past should be avoided at all costs...The policies we are forced to enact today go against the decades-long tradition of our higher education system. This problem should not be only a matter of concern of academics, but a concern for the entire academic community. (UA_14)

Negative framings of the communist past were also evident alongside the positive ones. In these accounts, the past - or more precisely, the tradition that this past has created - was seen as one of the main handicaps for Macedonian higher education, unsuitable within the present context and far from being a paradise. A frequently-made point from this perspective was that hanging on to the past has collapsed any serious attempt to catch up with international trends in the area of higher education, particularly at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the transitional period from the 'old' communist system, to the 'new' democratic one.

Administrators with such views commonly claimed that it was during this period that Macedonian higher education lost its footing with Western European counterparts, largely due to the inability of universities as well as of Government officials to accept the present and to face the need to make changes that might align the system more closely to 'Europe'. Such references often took the meaning of a desire, not to return to the past, but to go forward - in spite of the fact that the future in these forward-looking stances was also accompanied by possible images of danger or decay. Moreover, some respondents questioned whether there had ever really been a 'golden age' in academia. Several UAs were highly sceptical about whether the often-praised past had actually existed in the first place, and considered it to be an emotional fairy-tale:

> I am really reserved when it comes to this [the past]. I don't think it ever actually existed. I often hear colleagues framing the past in a positive light, but in my view there is much more romanticism and emotional fairy-tales in this than actual description of past reality...But I do think this is normal. When I reflect on my personal past I also tend to portray it in a positive light, not because all was smooth in how things worked in academia, but most likely because it reminds me of the days when I was young. (UA_11)

> I am instantly suspicious about this 'golden era' notion. I would not be too surprised if in two decades someone speaks about the 'era' today as being the 'golden era'. It may seem completely ridiculous, but who knows, it might happen. (UA_1)

From the above it is evident that there were mixed feelings among UAs regarding the communist past and whether it should be seen as a burden or celebrated as heritage. Irrespective of the 'truth' of there having been a golden era or not, and the dilemma over this past should be desired or despised, quite evidently, UAs commonly recognised the importance of the communist past and raised interesting points as to how this past should be perceived.

3. The views of UAs on matters of governance: system and institutional reforms

State reforms as a potential source of crisis

The UAs I interviewed were of the view that higher education is highly constrained by the current legal framework and the immense level of state (i.e. political) interference within it. Those two things together were identified as the most pressing problems confronting higher education in the country. A widely shared belief was that the institutional autonomy of universities is intentionally compromised by the numerous interventions in the Law on Higher Education. One UA perceived the frequency of legislative change to be a 'shock therapy' serving the purpose of 'keeping things uncertain, unstable…shaking the autonomy up' (UA_8). Moreover, the intensity of change was seen as 'evidence that the system is not working as it should' (UA_12), and as a sign that 'the Government has no clear idea of what it is doing'

(UA_1). A concern raised by others was that 'the vision for higher education is being 'lost' in the process' (UA_5).

A pessimistic and highly critical overtone prevailed concerning almost all reforms that the state has initiated. Administrators regarded them more as a source of potential crisis than as one of opportunity, and expressed serious reservations about the sustainability of the system with the current pace of reforms. For instance, there was a broad consensus that the dispersed studies policy (i.e. satellite studies/campuses) is unnecessary, poorly planned and yet 'another serious blow to the already-vulnerable and underfunded Macedonian higher education system' (UA_11). UAs critically reflected on the purpose, intensity and impact of this policy initiative. They suggested that as an alternative to the dispersed studies policy, top priority needed to be given to strengthening the quality of existing higher education institutions, and only then to potentially start considering the idea of 'decentralisation' (UA_3) of higher education.

UAs representing the public sector institutions often stated that the Government did not consult public institutions prior to announcing the plan for the introduction of dispersed studies, and later on then fell short of adequately supporting the execution of the programme financially. Besides this, a much highlighted concern was that the number of academic posts has not grown significantly to accommodate for the increasing demand imposed by the Government, which has led to the 'speeding up' of expectations for the existing academic staff at all levels. Apart from the growing pressure placed on academics, a reference was also made to the time effort the dispersed studies take, since academics are often expected to travel back and forth up to 200 kilometres a day in order to teach classes and fulfil their duties. 'We send people by buses to different places to teach and bring them back the same day in the evening. I call it academic

tourism' (UA_2). Another UA made a similar analogy, referring to 'a traveling circus' (UA_5) to depict the amount of time which academics must spend on the road teaching.

Critical remarks were also evident when the national ranking of universities was discussed. UAs tended to be of the opinion that the ranking exercise does not offer a frank assessment of their universities, but rather stimulates, as one UA noted, 'an unrealistic urge to present the institution as being as positive as possible in trying to improve its position in the ranking' (UA_14). Interviewees from the two private universities believed that the ranking serves the purpose of discrediting private institutions in the eyes of the public. Moreover, it was widely believed that the ranking was introduced as a policy initiative that could more readily be 'sold' to the general public as a commitment to quality and ultimately political success than patient reform that would deliver real progress. Reservations were also expressed about the necessity of such a costly financial burden (estimated at around half a million euros for each ranking) in a severely underfunded system.

Interestingly, many UAs believed that there was more space for open dialogue and interaction with State authorities during the socialist era and immediately after. There was a rather clear perception that the reform process under the post-socialist Governments became even less transparent and prone to even higher levels of state interference. In particular, the fact that the state had adopted reforms with a more controlling form of oversight generated much criticism during the interviews. The expanding reach of politics was seen as having created unique pressures within the institutional affairs of universities, from the standpoint that the Government has been quick to interfere in areas previously left to institutions to manage (for example, enrolment quotas, use of funds and so on).

In order to stand a chance of improving the current situation, administrators spoke about the necessity of 'reforming the reforms' (UA_6), which would require a 'completely new strategic approach relaxed from state intervention' (UA_9). However, most UAs were sceptical that such an implementation would occur in the near future and stated that it will take many years for higher education to regain critical distance from politics. In a typical commentary, one UA observed the following:

> I am sceptical that the Government would sincerely and seriously consider making a move in this direction [i.e. in the direction of decreasing state interference]. It does not have the will or interest in doing so…I can't influence or tell politicians what to do. They can't, even between themselves, agree on what's right. This is why there is basically no higher education strategy in the country… The damage created over the last decade will not be easy to fix. The scars will need time to heal and if we don't apply the appropriate medicine they will not heal properly so we are going to keep having the same problems as a result.' (UA_9)

The wait-and-see mentality of UAs concerning institutional reforms

Administrators believed that universities in North Macedonia are not prepared to keep up with the changing dynamics imposed on them by the State. The pace of changes was seen as happening to a much higher degree than what universities would ideally desire or what they can realistically handle. The majority of UAs believed that, confronted with multiple reforms, they are often left with no other choice but to find different legal and illegal ways to minimise the impact of state-imposed reforms on their institutions. As one UA noted, 'it is a move that we have to make in order to protect our institution. If we comply with everything they [Government officials] say, the system will collapse' (UA_12).

The usual justification made by UAs for such steps was that they allow universities to ensure some stability, to slow down or marginalise the legitimacy of reforms and ultimately to

maintain some critical distance from politics, even if just short term. Yet, such a justification alone does not take into account the possible negative repercussions resulting from surface-level compliance: namely, that it opens space to other practices of making cosmetic changes; that it can lead to many improvisations, structural peculiarities and a high degree of informality; and ultimately, that it reduces the potential for change.

Surprisingly, these potential concerns were almost never raised by interviewees. There was a shortage of examples where UAs talked about trying to initiate reforms internally as leaders of their institutions, or to anticipate the impeding dangers that come from resisting change at all costs. The traditional 'wait-and-see' mentality and the rejection of almost any change was a prevailing element of their narratives. In many ways, it appeared that administrators lacked the interest, or perhaps awareness, necessary to accept their own potential to act as agents of change.

As an exception, a few UAs believed that the universities lack critical reflection on their own role in bringing about the present unfavourable situation within the higher education sector. They referred in particular to the greater role that universities and university leaders could play in initiating grass-root initiatives. Their impression was that a more active rather than reactive approach would have potentially prevented or at least reduced the present degree of State intervention. At the same time, it would have helped in overcoming the charge that universities are inefficient and lack progress, are beset by corruption and a lack of transparency, and are detached from the needs and expectations of the economy and society within which they are located.

4. The academic journey: recruitment, progression and retention

4.1. Recruitment

A shortage of new positions at the entrance level: institutions 'walking on crutches'

UAs from the public universities, first and foremost, explained that their ability to recruit ECAs has been severely constrained by the central Government which has, in recent years, drastically decreased the level of State support necessary for the recruitment of new academic staff. An additional problem mentioned was that in order to hire new staff, public universities must first obtain financial approval from the Ministry of Finance, and that they are not permitted to hire using their own income earned through projects and tuition fees, even if they are able to do so. UAs explained that this situation allows the State to use the opening of new positions at public universities as yet another political instrument of institutional control.

The approval of positions often implies personal lobbying by the management of institutions, a strategy which often yields mixed results, depending on the current relationship between the state and the university in question. Accordingly, 'well-behaved' (UA_2) institutions are often given priority over those more critical of the Government. Even in cases when an approval for new hiring has been granted, the situation is often complicated by months of delay in processing the necessary documents, making this process highly bureaucratic and putting the institution, and the potential candidates, in a waiting position. Further, the Ministry of Finance and the Minister in charge tend to definitively establish the headcount of newly approved positions, as well as the specific people that would be granted approval, making the process extremely non-transparent and subject to political considerations.

This situation was presented by UAs as one of the most significant challenges in terms of maintaining the normal functioning of public universities. A consensus was present that the current academic staffing level was insufficient for the overall workload:

> We have reached a point where we can no longer satisfy even the essential teaching tasks because simply we do not have the staffing capacity to do all that (UA_5).

The shortage in some institutions seems to necessitate a three-digit number of staff, and was reaching alarming proportions:

> Senior people retire and new positions are not approved by the Government. We need around 200 early career staff right away. I would hire them today if the Government gives me approval. This figure sounds like a lot, but as a young institution we are in dire need of young people that will bring the university a step further. (UA_1)

> We are put in a position of begging the Ministry [of Finance]. We go and try to negotiate openings like we're at the local market. This is not how things should work. I would be happier if the Minister would says 'Hey listen, each X number of years you will get 30 new places' rather than having to bargain each year over and over again. At least I know what we can expect then…We are decimated as an institution, walking on crutches. We are in dire need of new employees. I would estimate that at the moment we need at least 150 new positions. (UA_2)

These unique circumstances and the nature of the problem have pushed public universities to basically improvise and to find alternative, but mostly short-lasting, solutions to the problem. It was brought up during several interviews that Faculties are now increasingly turning to temporary expedients and shadow appointments which do not exist within the career system. This typically means hiring ECAs on non-academic contracts, for example as administrators or volunteers who are paid 'in envelopes'. UAs believed that this practice of hiring resolves the problem for institutions to a certain extent and for a certain period; yet, quite surprisingly, UAs did not seem to take notice of the problems faced by those individuals who find

themselves in these precarious positions, and of how the shadow appointment system could impact on their academic careers.

In the private sector, the recruitment of ECAs is similarly constrained, but for a very different reason, mostly connected to the general financial stability of the institution or of the particular Faculty in question. Uncertainties around the aggressive expansion of the public system with the opening of new universities and satellite branches, and the potential decrease in student numbers which this might cause for private universities, as UAs explained, has made them more reserved with opening new positions, even if there is a need for hiring:

> The higher education market is becoming unstable, today you have 100 students in a programme, tomorrow maybe just 25. For 25 students you don't need the same number of staff. (UA_4)

Whereas in the two public universities there seemed to be a need for new hiring almost across the entire institution, the situation in the private universities seemed to be more mixed, with some Faculties having enough or more than enough staff, and others facing a shortage. The following extract points to this issue:

> The only honest answer I can give you is that it depends on the subject. Some [Faculties] are overstaffed and others are understaffed. In the latter case we don't always have the necessary budget to fill in these gaps. (UA_11)

Academic 'inbreeding': preference for 'homegrown' candidates over 'strangers'

Among the UAs I interviewed, there was no clear consensus over whether hiring homegrown academics is a negative or a positive practice, but in general academic inbreeding[10] was not

[10] I use the term 'inbreeding' with some hesitation as it is frequently used in a largely pejorative way. Instead, I suggest the use of a more neutral term such as 'homegrown', and I insist that the eugenicist connotations of

considered problematic. None of the four institutions had policies in place to eliminate or reduce the number of homegrown academics, and based on what UAs shared, the hiring of one's own graduates was the obviously preferred method of hiring.

While in the private institutions recruitment seems to be slightly more open and egalitarian, in general UAs from both sectors stated that priority is often, and in some cases exclusively, given to 'home-grown' and local candidates (over outsiders), who have had some previous links with the institution, typically by being (former) students there. In this context, both public and private universities are largely inwardly oriented when it comes to hiring.

The preference for 'homegrowns' was often justified as a way of reducing the risk of failure linked to the recruitment of people not known to the institution, or '*stranci*' (strangers) as one UA (UA_15) put it. In other words, UAs saw the recruitment of internal candidates as a safer and less risky endeavour, mentioning that the evaluation of past achievements and the assessment of the potential of the candidate are easier when he or she is already known internally. So, while theoretically the search for academic talent is open to applicants from different institutions, it is far less likely that an external candidate could get chosen over an internal one. This certainly has implications on the opportunities available to ECAs.

A shared view amongst many UAs was that 'home-grown' candidates are not preferred simply because they are local candidates, but rather because they are considered to be the best candidates available on the market. Several UAs spoke of internal recruitment as clear evidence of the quality of their institution and its ability to train respectable cadres. In this context, they

'inbreeding' and 'inbred' are firmly removed from use. This, I believe, will help reducing the stigma and discriminatory outlook towards academics who engage in such career routes.

took it both as a question of institutional identity and personal pride in selecting someone who has been ‘taken out of my school bench’ (UA_6). This narrative was felt most strongly among UAs in public universities who often had a strong conviction that private universities do not have much to offer that they could not find in their own institution. In this respect, recruiting internally was also seen as a sign of prestige and an assurance of quality. With this type of bias that seniors hold, it may become very difficult for graduates from private institutions to penetrate the public domain of academic employment.

Interestingly, however, and contrary to my expectations, a similar logic was also quite evident at private universities, which I had felt would be far more open to outsiders. Indeed, to some extent UAs from these institutions were more open to external talent, but mostly in situations where they could not recruit internally for practical reasons (e.g., when opening a new program that has no previous internal talent pool to draw upon). The impression seems to be that once universities have produced a class of graduates, they prefer to recruit from them internally, which increases the number of ‘homegrown’ academics. In this context, it is difficult to expect that internal hiring rates will drop significantly in the near future.

It was somewhat striking that many UAs did not see the potential damaging effects that internal recruitment can have both for the institutions hiring and for the individual being hired. In the academic career literature, Horta et al. (2011: 37) warn that the practice of hiring a high proportion of ‘homegrowns’ can produce ‘institutional parochialism and intellectual isolation’. With this suggestion in mind, the preference for recruitment from a closed and immediate circle in the Macedonian context can be understood as a mechanism for structural reproduction of an entrenched institutional academic culture.

Such a possible interpretation was considered by only a few UAs. One of them suspected that the best (outside) candidates are not always selected as many senior colleagues fear this would 'challenge the way things are done' (UA_3). Another UA explicitly stated his conviction that the recruitment procedure is not fair to candidates who have studied abroad, and believed that this is why they choose not to apply, thus limiting possibilities of hiring the best candidates:

> I think we have fallen short in recruitment as an institution. The best candidates are not always those that have the advantage. Studying abroad is a burden rather than an advantage. For them [those who studied abroad], the penetration into the system goes much slower. (UA_8)

A third UA admitted that in deciding about recruiting homegrown candidates, some Faculties are also not immune to nepotism. As he explained the spot can already be informally promised to a particular internal candidate, which makes the hiring process uncompetitive and *pro forma*, and maintains internal career practices.

> It is fair to say that there is much to be done to increase the transparency and accountability of how we do things. Until we do something serious about it, our system is going to keep giving birth to different types of discrimination in the hiring process and in some other areas. (UA_13)

At the same time, one UA posed an ethical dilemma: whether it is more just to pick an external candidate who has a greater scholarly record, or an internal candidate who has committed to the institution and has worked in the institution for many years:

> Strictly speaking the external candidate should get hired, right?! But I don't think it's that straightforward. What kind of a message do we then send to our own students who have been loyal to us and, pardon my language, who have been working their asses off. Is it really fair if I say to my younger colleague that has worked here for seven years that s/he does not deserve to be promoted just because someone from the outside has a better resumé? (UA_14)

Finally, there also seems to be a practical element in why most universities prefer their own graduates. As UAs explained, it speeds up the process of recruitment and more importantly

reduces the costs associated with external recruitment – allowing institutions to reduce financial and human resources costs. Further, some degree of internal recruitment was explained as necessary, considering the small size of the Macedonian higher education system. The fact that particular universities still hold monopoly over specific fields of study is another factor that makes internal recruitment difficult to avoid it. The shortage of academic staff in many institutions also increases the pressure for homegrown hiring.

In this context, it may appear that some level of internal recruitment seems even sensible. In a small peripheral system such as the Macedonian one, internal recruitment has the potential to create a strong internal competition. This is if promotion procedures are followed more strictly and conducted more transparently (which as I show in later chapters is not the case currently). Moreover, internal hiring seems logical, particularly for the top universities, where many of the best candidates are likely those that are 'grown' internally. The internal recruitment seems to reduce the risk for institutions as they get to judge more clearly, and early on, how candidates are going to work out; whereas in non-peripheral systems when someone is hired from outside, typically after a PhD, it is less certain how this person will fit in. With this in mind, the present situation in non-peripheral countries, which are less dependent on homegrown staff, also seems to have its own disadvantages. While a non-homegrown academic can clearly bring new intellectual ideas, the person may not be a good match for the teaching mission and colleagueship. Taking all this into account, it seems difficult to label internal recruitment as negative-only (which is the common label in the literature), even though clearly there are disadvantages that come along with it.

How difficult is it to attract people in academia?

The overriding narrative in most interviews with UAs was that there is no major problem with the supply of prospective entrants to the professoriate. This can in part be explained by the early recruitment of ECAs which often starts already at the Masters' level, and before students can get a real feel for other opportunities on the labour market. A potential shortage of supply was seen only in a few disciplinary areas where a corresponding shortage of students was found, reducing the number of those potentially joining academia. In this respect, attracting ECAs, unlike their retention (to which I turn later in this section), was not seen as a particular challenge.

> Getting people interested has never really been a problem. I think the bigger problem is holding onto them. Retention is the problem. People that are interested in academia will find their way into it. (UA_3).

While attracting ECAs locally was not seen as a major challenge, recruiting from an international pool of candidates was considered a daunting task. The stated reasons were monetary and linguistic. Namely, the lack of financial incentive to attract internationals (i.e. the inability to offer salaries competitive with universities in the more affluent countries). And the language of instruction (in most cases Macedonian), which only a few foreigners can potentially meet.

> There are certain demands on our academic staff that not a lot of external people can meet. For example, how many Oxford academics do you think can speak Macedonian? Probably only a few. And do you think they will have a financial motive to come? (UA_12)

A more sensible and realistic vision regarding an 'internationalisation at home' was seen in the potential of recruiting young people from the Macedonian academic diaspora. While this was

the ideal solution, many believed that it would still be fairly difficult to convince those people to come back:

> In my view this [diaspora recruitment] is the ideal way to bring new people. That's the kind of people that we want in the system. Having said that, I am not sure if it is going to show results without some state support. (UA_2)

> We want to bring the best Macedonian talent from abroad, keep them, use them and learn from them, but I think many of the best students abroad are not having an intention of getting an academic job back in North Macedonia. Many would say to them, you are a fool for coming and trading British or German academia for this. Or not necessarily a fool, but certainly that they would need to face a different kind of environment and different challenges from what they are used to. (UA_5)

4.2. Promotion

The Law on Higher Education sets out the general legal framework determining the criteria for promotion in North Macedonia. Until recently, these criteria were regulated by the institutions themselves, rather than the law. This often created an uneven playing field as each institution determined a different set of criteria, often to the extent that Faculties within a single university employed a very different set of rules. The loose definition of the criteria and its complacent enforcement were some of the key challenges that threatened the effectiveness of the system in place.

The situation changed with the amendments to the Law on Higher Education in 2011, which introduced more stringent rules for promotion, binding all higher education institutions. The State-initiated amendments focused on determining and expanding the volume of research required for promotion, as an instrument that the Government believed would stimulate an increase in the scope and quality of research. Ultimately, from the Governments' point of view, the goal was for universities to become much more research-focused over time.

Article 125 of the Law on Higher Education stipulates detailed requirements for each step of the promotion ladder. These can be summarised as follows:

- The requirements for obtaining promotion from an Assistant to a Docent position include the following: a doctoral degree, an average GPA of at least 8.00 (on a scale to 10) in undergraduate and graduate studies, a minimum of four papers published in international journals or at least two papers published in impact factor journals (indexed in the Web of Science data-base) in the last five years.

- The criteria for promotion to the title of an Associate Professor include: five papers published in international journals or three papers published in impact factor journals (again, indexed in the Web of Science) in the last five years.

- Finally, the criteria for promotion to a Full Professor include: six papers published in international journals, or four papers published in impact factor journals (indexed in the Web of Science) in the last five years.

With the new criteria in place, the system of promotion shifted from a relatively minimal and non-demanding policy in the research domain to another extreme, one that imposes much stricter benchmarks for promotion with a strong emphasis on international research outputs. In other words, while candidates in the past were required to have published an insignificant number of papers (or none at all), today they are expected to produce internationally relevant research in leading journals. At the time, the abrupt shift in promotion requirements was a subject of widespread criticism within the academic community and was perceived as an

intrusion into the autonomy of universities to decide on this matter internally. The original proposal (produced by the Government) for the amendment of the law was surrounded with an even greater controversy as it originally prescribed even stricter rules demanding publications in impact factor journals as an obligatory requirement as well. Several months later, under immense pressure from the academic community, this specific article was alternated to include publication in impact factor journals as an optional choice (captured by the inclusion of the word 'Or' in Article 125 described above).

A broad awareness was present among UAs that the old system of promotion required a certain level of improvement. However, there were divided views about how this issue should be approached. One group believed that ideally, this sort of detail concerning research should be left for universities to determine in the same way as teaching, while others considered that in a small country such as North Macedonia it is necessary to create standardised rules at the national level. At face value, several UAs believed that having any research criteria is better than having none; however, even they, along with the majority of others, believed that the new criteria for promotion have not been a step in the right direction and have made little difference in improving the quality of research or the promotion system as a whole.

Many UAs believed that the criteria for promotion in regards to research has not been thoughtfully tailored to the academic tradition of universities within the country – which has been heavily teaching-oriented since its initiation. The view of one UA highlights some of these issues:

> I think that having criteria for research is important, but I think the Government mis-stepped in defining the amount of research required. They either don't know or have completely misunderstood what academics do in this country. It seems like they have never asked themselves how much time do academics

> spend on teaching and what kind of research they can produce. Trying to introduce the same standards for research that apply in countries such as the UK or Germany is just foolish. The oldest institution in the country is under 100 years old so it is impossible to compare ourselves to countries like that…Our history is in teaching and this I think should be nurtured. (UA_8)

A further and related concern was that the criteria for publication are almost impossible to be achieved given the present lack of resources:

> In an attempt to increase the quality of higher education, the Government introduced very strict criteria for promotion. The idea was to find a way to improve the quality. The Prime Minister actually said that. I spoke to him several times and he told me directly that this is what he was trying to do by introducing the impact factor, and those sorts of things. I said yes, but these criteria are not easy to achieve if the Government only ceremonially supports research. Anyway, they [the Government] carried on with it. They raised the bar without increasing their support for research…You can only get appointed to the next level now if you have, you know, won a Nobel Prize. I think both the younger and the older ones have and will suffer from this system of promotion. (UA_14)

The content of the criteria was yet another source of complaints among all UAs. They saw it as promoting graphomania, where the number and type of publications are more important than their quality – and thus, in many ways, echoing the stream of critical commentary found internationally, which critiques the increasing use of metric-based criteria to assess research outputs. The following commentary sums up the views of most UAs:

> We are forced to rely strictly on proxy indicators, such as the number of publications, instead of focusing on their quality. I am personally annoyed by this 'bean-counting exercise'. The system as it is now favours quantifiable science. It's like being proud that you have collected 50 apples without necessarily telling or knowing how many of them are actually good to eat. (UA_11)

As a rare positive outcome of the reform, UAs underlined that with the new promotion system in place, legal requirements are now followed more strictly than in the past. However, this observation was inconsistent and in apparent contradiction with several other statements made

during the interviews. Namely, several UAs representing different universities openly acknowledged that academics who are usually well into their second or third decade of academic work – having either already been granted an associate or full professorship, or being close to reaching retirement – are not strictly evaluated, as meeting the requirements could present a major challenge for them. In other words, they are typically granted promotion almost automatically on the basis of their long years of service, rather than in view of the legal criteria, their academic merits or expectations regarding their future academic contribution. So even under the new rules, running the risk of not being promoted at the level of associate or full professorship is almost unheard of. Only extreme circumstances, such as corruption or sexual misconduct, can dislodge a senior professor, although even in these cases more radical steps are usually avoided.

The excerpts from the interviews provided below illustrate that the promotion system is weakly institutionalised when it comes to more senior positions and more closely followed (only) when it comes to ECAs:

> Admittedly, we [senior professors] are not treated in the same way as our younger colleagues. We are protected like polar bears. No one can touch us…and I admit this is not good. It does not feel right. (UA_12)

> Some academics are more equal than others. I'm well aware of some senior people who have reached higher ranks in our university, and I'm sure the same is true for other universities, without publishing anything at all of significance. (UA_2)

> In my two-decades long academic career, I can't think of a case where one of my senior colleagues has been denied promotion because he did not fulfil the requirements for promotion, but I can surely think of many such instances for ECAs. (UA_7)

Lastly, in terms of the ways institutions protected themselves from misbehaviour, such as publishing in predatory journals, it was only administrators from one university that talked about making efforts to prevent this.

> How frequently people publish in predatory journals? I don't know. I've heard anecdotally that it happens, but I can't confirm. What we try to do is raise awareness among our own people about what are the good signs and signs of the level of quality of a journal. Helping staff to identify conferences that are predatory, journals that are fake…For several years we used the list by a guy called Jeffrey Beall who listed a significant amount of fake journals, but since the list has been taken down some time ago, I guess under the threat oof a legal action, we struggle to find an alternative list. (UA_8)

4.3. Retention

Across all four universities, UAs univocally spoke of a worrying number of ECAs who may soon leave or have already left their institutions. Only a few interviewees partly took blame for this situation in saying that institutions could and should do more to offer ECAs better prospects; however, many considered that this problem goes beyond their institutional power or will, and required a nation-wide approach by the state.

In spite of the fact that retention was identified as a major problem, none of the four institutions have developed mechanisms for early detection and possible prevention of departures, or exit surveys to identify the particular reasons why some ECAs chose to leave. Consequently, the assessment of the situation resides almost entirely on personal impressions and evidence collected in an informal manner. Several interviewees saw this as an area where more systemic solutions must be made in order to acquire more precise and conclusive data. However, one UA categorically explained that there is no need for that 'because in large part people tell us why they leave, they will tell you explicitly, I'm getting more money, I got a job offer here or there…' (UA_13).

Despite lacking specific data to analyse the issue of retention, there seemed to be a firm conviction amongst UAs about the underlying reasons for the departure of ECAs. Anecdotally, they believed that most ECAs are leaving for better paid positions abroad (academic and non-academic), and almost never for positions at other universities locally (a move which they believed was only common for senior academic staff and 'big names' who are hired to increase the reputation of a particular university). Almost all interviewees mentioned instances in which universities from abroad have poached their talent. In a global and competitive academic market, they believed that Macedonian universities do not stand a chance of deflecting a tempting offer (particularly in financial terms) from elsewhere, making it even harder to try to talk talented individuals out of leaving. The views presented below sum up most of this discussion:

> Keeping the right talent has never been more important. It's really important to have good people on board, but we have a huge problem with international universities poaching out talent. Just recently a head-hunter from the Gulf region 'stole' six of our staff, mostly young Docents, and offered them great money so we understand why they went. But it is tough when you have built someone for years and then they leave, that's hard for us. (UA_14)

> At my Faculty alone, three ECAs have left in the last two years and a dozen others in the last decade. One left to go to Germany, another finished his doctorate and went to California, and a third one went to Israel. The potential of the institution is dying in front of our eyes…It's painful to see them leave, but these are all bright people, citizens of the world. (UA_7)

> As things stand at the moment, we are going to lose all of our best talent in the long term, everybody who is good is getting out of here and goes straight to the UK, Germany or Sweden. (UA_4)

Expectedly, the rising trend of departures was seen as a major upset for the current and future vitality of higher education institutions. It was often remarked that universities are no longer dealing with individual cases, but with a large-scale problem reaching alarming proportions. Yet, at the same time, there is an imminent danger of high rates of leaving becoming

normalised, as something that institutions can do little about. What is rather indicative, particularly in light of the perceived scale of the problem, is the fact that none of the institutions have so far initiated internal debates about what might be done on the institutional level to address this problem. Nor have they created internal procedures to help track what happens with those who leave, and why they are leaving in the first place.

From the UAs standpoint, the future of ECAs is in murky waters. When asked to reflect on what they believed the future holds for ECA, very few could speak in optimistic terms:

> I am not convinced that we have agreed internally on what our plan is for the future of these young people. What will happen to those that are soon to finish their doctorate is still uncertain. Are they all going to get promoted? I am not sure, maybe is all I can say really. (UA_1)

> Many ECAs will need to accept that it is hard to give them a straightforward answer whether they will have a long-lasting career in the institution or not…They need to be patient and show flexibility. (UA_2)

> It is hard to say. If I am being realistic and completely open about it, not all of them [ECAs] will have a bright future ahead. Some, I am sure will not get what they hope for, and I think it is our duty to make this as clear as possible to them, which admittedly we have not done in many instances. (UA_15)

From an institutional perspective, the strategy of sending unclear or mixed messages about the future career prospects of ECAs might seem like an effective strategy at first glance: it keeps candidates on their toes, while, at the same time, makes use of their potential in teaching and research. In doing so, institutions keep all options open and leave room for multiple future scenarios at a seemingly fairly low cost. However, in the long run neither the ECA concerned nor the institution in question are likely to benefit. The expectation laid upon ECAs to show flexibility in regard to their plans for the future can easily turn into exploitation. As one UA explained:

> If we are honest we will admit there is a real threat of exploitation as it happens here and in other universities… All too often we tend to stick with the official story that the uncertainty is all the Government's fault, which is most certainly true but there is certainly space for us to do more and to make sure that these young people know what they are after…At the end of the day, we should discuss things more openly. I think everybody deserves to be treated fairly and respectfully, and deserves to know what his or her options are, even if they are not crystal clear. If we are not careful, the norm would soon become to treat ECAs in an exploitative manner. In some respect, this is already underway. By not telling them how long they would last in the institution we are in effect making use of an already unfair situation. (UA_5)

5. Day-to-day work arrangements: workload, mentorship and participation in decision-making

Workload allocation

UAs explained that all academic staff members have a contractual obligation to be engaged in teaching, with the hours of teaching depending on the academic rank. According to the Law on Higher Education, Assistants and Docents should teach 12 to 16 hours per week, with a maximum of four courses per semester. Associate Professors and above should teach between eight and 12 hours per week, with a maximum of four courses per semester. However, as admitted in several interviews, this division is not strictly followed and ECAs are often teaching six, seven or more courses per semester:

> We try not to break the law, but I will openly acknowledge that one of our problems is that sometimes ECAs teach more than they should. It is not fair to ask someone to teach 25 hours per week, but it can happen, although not very often. (UA_2)

The actual time spend on research and administration is not calculated in the workload, yet it is expected of ECAs to perform these duties. UAs were fairly inexplicit as to how universities make sure that ECAs are given sufficient time to perform research and administrative duties in light of their significant teaching commitment. There was no evidence of a workload balancing

model which would allow a more transparent comparison of the workload falling to individual members of staff. One UA, had a rather controversial comment, claiming that his institution has tried to encourage younger staff to get more active in research, but this effort was without any success since 'ECAs don't see any financial benefit in doing research' (UA_11).

Availability of research and teaching mentorship for ECAs

In terms of PhD supervision, the 2012 amendments to the Law on Higher Education introduced new requirements. The law requires supervisors to demonstrate that they are research active by having published either two articles in the last five years in an impact factor journal or six papers in a less prestigious international journal. They can now supervise a maximum of three doctoral candidates, whereas in the past there were no limits as to how many students one can supervise. As UAs explained, the new requirements have caused major problems for institutions because only a small portion of senior staff can meet the criteria. In consequence, universities lack qualified supervisors, and some students are admitted to a doctoral programme although no supervisor is immediately available in their field.

> I supervised PhD students for almost twenty years, but the Law now does not allow me to supervise anymore. The paradox is that the criteria for a Master's supervisor are even higher…and you have to be accredited by the Ministry of Education and not by your own university. My ability to supervise is basically judged by some bureaucrat…The outcome is that we don't have enough accredited supervisors. (UA_12)

In terms of doctoral supervision, none of the institutions had their own guidelines developed that would provide more detail as to how supervision should be organised, or for instance, how frequently the supervisor and the student should meet. Furthermore, supervisors do not receive any training or support in their roles, so how they supervise is left entirely at their discretion. Theoretically, students can change supervisors, but as told by UAs across several institutions,

students need to have a have a very good reason and it must be typically done with the agreement of the initial supervisor - a situation which can obviously be problematic and cause undue stress for students unsatisfied with their mentors.

Teaching mentorship seems to be even less structured. None of the universities had concept of, or process for, teaching socialisation for its early career staff or any higher ranked staff. In other words, the universities covered by this study had no systemic arrangements in place for the sharing of teaching practice or mentoring, and in effect, as UAs explained, the level of academic support is very much dependent on the approach of the senior professor, his/her personal willingness, and the arrangement made with the ECA. Yet, there was awareness among several UAs that things need to be improved in this area ('We do need more detailed guidelines. Too many things are left floating in the air and people interpret rules as they wish' (UA_3).

Opportunities for ECAs' participation in decision-making

ECAs participation in governance is through membership in the Research-Teaching Council at the level of Faculty. However, this is only for Docents and not for Assistants. A central level representation of ECAs is not mirrored. When UAs were challenged to describe how some of the issues of ECAs, especially Assistants, might get resolved if they are not invited to take part in any formal decision-making, many UAs seemed to believe that this is not a major problem. They explain that Assistants would reach out to them if they had any problems. In this context, UAs did not seem to believe that the present model of institutional governance itself precluded a problem, as ECAs had informal channels to be heard. However, what this situation seems to ignore, or perhaps misrecognise, are the possible power issues that may prevent ECAs from raising their voice in such a way.

6. Conclusions

Considering the communist past and how it should be perceived, UAs were far from univocal. Some looked favourably on it and with nostalgia, others vowed against it. But when it comes to the present, agreement was clearly evident amongst UAs. They did not hide their poor opinion about a large majority of the reform steps taken by the Government, and expressed considerable reservations and pessimism about the direction in which the higher education system is now moving. Creating a common vision was looked at positively by UAs, but at the same time as being very difficult considering their fragmented relationship with the State. The way higher education is governed on system level was perceived to create a number of difficulties for UAs in managing their institutions, assuring long-term planning, as well as creating more adequate recruitment, promotion and retention policies. Evidently, there are many structural factors that are limiting institutions from going in the direction that is seen to be the best.

At the same time, instead of profoundly rethinking the academic landscape and proposing alternatives, universities and their management have not responded adequately to these challenges in order to create sustainable institutions, but have rather sought ways to cover up for their own shortcomings. In some of the conversations with UAs there seemed to be a stubborn refusal to admit that part of the blame for the present situation falls down to how universities are operating internally. Academic freedom is too often used as a mechanism to reject responsibility and accountability for universities' actions. As the next two chapters show, there are certainly many instances in which institutions could and should have done better to improve the work conditions and overall well-being of ECAs.

In regards to the recruitment of new staff, one recognisable feature, to an extent unparalleled in many Western European countries, is the high degree of internal recruitmen. The extent evident in the Macedonian context appears to be rather unhealthy as it creates a recruitment culture which is neither fair to outsiders, nor does it assure means of obtaining the best talent. Hence, one is left with the question of why universities continue to rely so much on 'home-grown' candidates even though there is evidence that this is not serving their best interests. Now, the answer to that is not straightforward. The most obvious answer is that any small higher education system, the Macedonian system being no exception to this, is almost naturally predestined to have some level of internal recruitment. Although this reasoning is eminently sensible and justifiable, it might not be the most compelling explanation of the problem. An equally plausible explanation is that internal recruitment is used as a strategy for structural reproduction. In other words, universities engage in such a type of recruitment to sustain their norms and practices and keep them intact from possible outside influence. The ways in which the culture of internal recruitment impacts the career horizons of ECAs is addressed in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

This last point brings another important characteristic of the Macedonian higher education into consideration: the inward-looking and closed nature of the recruitment and promotion system. The competition for academic posts is mostly local, usually within the confines of a single department. Structural conditions such as internal recruitment, the vertical differentiation of universities and the relatively closed nature of the labour market for foreign academics can be seen as the major drivers of this trend. Another major problem seems to be the double-standards in terms of the application of rules regarding ECAs and senior academics, particularly around promotion. While ECAs are exponentially becoming more pressured to do research under the recent changes in the promotion system, this does not seem to be the case for all academics.

Based on what UAs shared, the retention of academics, particularly younger ones, has become more and more difficult over recent years. This is partly because international universities are poaching talent and partly because universities are lacking systemic measures to assure that they have done everything in their power to keep ECAs working in their institutions. The absence of sustained and strategic effort shows the unfortunate normalisation of these conditions, which poses a serious and imminent threat to the vitality of Macedonian higher education, the future of many ECAs, and the workload burden on the already limited number of early career staff.

While there are official regulations as to how many hours ECAs should teach, these are not strictly followed, and many ECAs are requested to teach more than this. Research and other commitments are not taken into account when calculating the official workload of ECAs which may add to the struggle of obtaining a better balance between different roles. Further, both in terms of teaching and research it is clear that there are no mechanisms in place to allow for structured mentorship, and to account for the different socialisation needs of ECAs. Finally, the participation of ECAs in decision-making processes is partial, with Docent being represented in Faculty-level bodies, but without any representation at institutional level.

In the next two chapters of this thesis, much evidence is presented about the consequence of this issues described here and how they directly impact the day-to-day lives and career trajectories of ECAs.

CHAPTER 7

THE DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCES OF ECAs: INDEPENDENCE, TIME-PRESSURES AND UNCERTAINTY

> I am contracted for a 40 hour week. That means five eight-hour days. But in reality my workload exceeds 60 hours, easily. I often find myself pulling 12 hour days because there is no way that I could teach six hours every day and prepare teaching materials for the four courses that I teach (two of which I am teaching for the first time) and get my student essay marking done and respond to emails and read papers and write journal articles and do admin work and attend meetings. It's impossible to fit in that much work into a 40 hour week…There is too much to do on any given working day, week, semester… (Filip)

1. Introduction

Filip's description of his day-to-day reality provides a good sense of what this chapter demonstrates, and the type of data that emerged from the analysis. Based on a fine-grained description of the roles, actions, routines, time pressures and relationships that characterise the everyday work of ECAs, this chapter analyses how ECAs construct, negotiate and experience time on the everyday basis, while attending to the dynamics of interplay between structure and agency.

By focusing on the day-to-day experiences of ECAs, I address a weakness in contemporary higher education literature which has traditionally, and too frequently, provided limited description of practices, activities and events that are part of the daily commitments of academics. As Jazvac-Martek et al. (2011: 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. In this respect, this chapter 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 periphery like North Macedonia.

The daily experiences on which I report here are presented on a past-present-future continuum, in order to enable me to track changes that had occurred at different stages over time. During the interviewing process, ECAs were asked to freely describe their day-to-day activities and decisions, starting from the moment they joined academia, moving on to the present and to how they imagine them in the near future.

In Section 2, I begin by examining the early days of ECAs' socialisation, and how the different ways they perceived early independence in teaching and research shaped their development and identity. Here I also discuss the specific ways in which ECAs were building relationships of dependency with their supervisors, and how they compensated for the lack of support locally by networking internationally. Then, in Section 3, I focus on the present, and offer insights into the time pressures and challenges of managing the different roles (teaching, research, administration) and the ways in which ECAs were attempting to balance these or act upon them. In Section 4, I consider the day-to-day experiences of ECAs in relation to their future, and how their past and present experiences shape their understanding of it. In Section 5 I present the conclusions of the chapter.

2. The past: early autonomy, dependence and networking

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

In terms of teaching, ECAs were, more or less, 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' (Archer 2003: 7) 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 instance, Irena spoke of being able to 'step up to the challenge' and use 'freedom' as 'a manoeuvre space' that allows her to do her work as she wishes. She valued being an 'autonomous reflexive' (Archer 2003: 210) and enjoyed her own power over the direction and format of her teaching, and welcomed being given more challenging work and targets.

For others, however, this same freedom and autonomy was far from ideal. It created discomfort and intensified worries and stress. The large majority of participants felt that they would have liked to see more support and structure for their roles at the beginning. So, contrary to Irena above, they felt that they often had too much freedom and agency over their work at the start of their careers. A particularly problematic issue that came up in the discussions was that the 'open hands' (Nikola) that most ECAs had did not protect them from being overworked. Several ECAs narrated their early teaching days as a period where anything beyond teaching, such as family or leisure, ceased to exist for an indefinite period of time. It was common to

hear that there was hardly any sleep in the first years of teaching and that the lack of training and adequate preparation made them perceive teaching as intimidating.

> 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. (Maja)

For some ECAs, the early degree of freedom and the considerable amount of teaching workload placed upon them related to a sense of being exploited. For instance, Ljubica believed that institutions are prone to 'terrorising' newcomers because they know there will be only a few complaining and saying 'no'. As she further explained, saying 'no' in the beginning is hard as this can establish a reputation as someone who is 'difficult'.

Another issue was that the degree of freedom given created a 'responsibility of knowing everything', as Ognen explained. 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. (Ognen)

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?.[11]

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' (Archer 2003: 191) and 'practical experimentation' (Archer 2003: 191) - 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.

In reflecting on the process of learning how to teach, Dragan did not feel that there was any mentoring to speak of. He talked about learning everything 'first-hand' and receiving 'no instruction whatsoever'. He disappointingly noted that even though he actively sought support from his mentor and other peers, he 'had to figure it out on my own'. This was also echoed by Glasna who spoke of learning from practice 'while trying to figure out what works and what doesn't', and receiving no orientation other than a brief discussion with the head of her *Cathedra* (i.e. Department).

[11] I examine in detail ECAs narratives around leaving academia in the next chapter, Chapter 8.

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 Konrad 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, or 'veterans' as Tomas called them, to observe their lessons, to discuss their performance and to provide suggestions for improvement. Those ECAs who tried this found the process to be extremely valuable; yet, they stated that such opportunities are sporadic and that most of the feedback that they get on their teaching generally occurs in quick meetings in the hallway or in the staff room in the interval between classes. Hence, opportunities for a more structured generational passing down of experience from one group of teachers to the next were seen as limited.

Others tried to learn how to teach by observing senior professors and 'similar others' (Archer 2003: 209) around them in the day-to-day work environment. For instance, Borkica talked about trying to 'steal approaches' from observing the lectures of her supervisor. She also reported using free time between lectures to attend classes of those colleagues whom she

admired, in order ‘to soak in their teaching craft’. She felt that observing colleagues was invaluable, because through her own practice alone, it would have taken several years to ‘put all the important pieces together’. For her the learning from colleagues incorporated not just an observation of what worked, but also what she believed did not. In this respect, what is important is that during these observations, Borkica did not accept everything as completely appropriate and used her judgment – which demonstrates her ‘meta-reflexivity’ (Archer 2003: 255) as an identity trait.

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 analysing 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 ‘to create something out of nothing’ (Maja), 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. What emerged from the data is that in the few first semesters of teaching, agency in the classroom was often very high, as ECAs were left to their own devices to figure out a way to manage a group of students and move them through the required curriculum. 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 adapt in order to ‘survive and

to thrive' (Archer 2003: 191). 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. It was fairly common to hear that one can be scheduled to teach five or six different courses right in the first semester of appointment. Notwithstanding the high degree of independence that ECAs had in terms of how they teach, there were marked limitations in what courses they were going to teach. Even if ECAs felt intellectually unfit to teach a particular course, they were quite regularly assigned by seniors to cover what Brane called 'unfamiliar territory'. In dealing with this challenge of 'involuntary placement' (Archer 2003: 184), some participants like Alma tried to mask their lack of competence by focusing on 'performance in presenting, rather than actual substance', while others like Oliver tried to be straight ('I made it clear to students that I am not an expert in most of the lecture topics').

A related challenge is the constant switching that comes with teaching very different courses. As Iva 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 her 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.

At the classroom level, some of the main challenges ECAs faced as novice teachers included difficulty in managing students and overcrowded classrooms, lesson planning and delivery, as well as more logistical issues such as scheduling, finding an available room to teach in and making sure that the ICT equipment works. All these things that needed to be navigated led to a feeling of what Zlatan called 'being thrown into the fire'. In his case, being 'thrown into fire', although stressful and challenging, ultimately inspired an attitude to 'beat the odds'. He saw the autonomy and potential for agentive action that comes with it as an excellent way to 'achieve things you never thought were possible'.

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 Oliver explained, his quick crossover from a being 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.

In dealing with this transition, several participants experienced a period of 'inner struggle' (Archer 2000: 78) before being able to make a meaningful connection with students.

Sometimes what helped establish a meaningful connection was to begin developing a strategy to understand the needs of students. For instance, Melita designed teaching exercises and activities allowing students to talk openly about what they valued in her teaching and what they felt needed to be improved. She recognised that it is often difficult for students to reflect out loud, especially when they are asked to talk about the weaknesses of a teacher. So she handed out index cards where students could write their comments in three simple columns: 'stop', 'start', 'continue' (i.e., what she needs to stop doing, what she needs to start doing, and what she needs to continue doing). Then she asked students to exchange these cards with one another before they started off the discussion. The anonymity, as she explained, 'made it easier for students to speak out loud and read the cards'.

Ljupco tried something different. He talked about allocating specific time at the end of each week when students could walk in to talk about topics (un)related to the class material. They talked about movies, events, and exhibitions, as well as certain topics covered in class. He believed that this was a good technique to 'learn from students, make them more relaxed and freer to share'. He also looked at it as an opportunity to address, partially if not fully, what he saw as one of the biggest drawbacks of being a university teacher in North Macedonia – overcrowded classrooms which prevent closer bonding and connectedness with students during class:

> Classrooms are overcrowded and it is logistically impossible to develop strong relationships with all of the students that I teach. In a certain way, the informal session really helped with overcoming this problem.

What was evident is that ECAs were able to navigate better through difficulties as they became more experienced. Responses such as having 'settled in' (Bisera), or having 'found my feet' (Glasna), illustrated a greater sense of control. This orientation, more evident among Docents,

also increased the sense of confidence that participants had: 'I now feel more confident with what I have to do' (Brane). Further, participants also expressed that time is needed in order to 'get better at teaching, figure out what I'm supposed to do and how' (Alma), which again highlights the importance of temporality and how profoundly time shapes individuals' experiences.

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. An important factor in this context were the institutional forces that had a constraining effect on the early construction of a researchers' identity. As observed by Tina, 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 reported 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 (an issue I address in greater depth later in this chapter).

However, the process of *perceiving oneself as a* researcher was not necessarily connected with the experience of *engaging* in research. As Biljana made 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 Biljana's 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 Biljana 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. For instance, Konrad acknowledged that he had to give up on research altogether because 'it was simply impossible to find time to conduct or even think about research considering the amount of teaching I was expected to perform in the first year'. Those who managed to preserve some time for research felt that this came with a cost to their '*modus vivendi*' (Archer 2003: 169). The problem, as Denis emphasised, is that 'one needs to cut down private time with family and friends in order to achieve this'.

The absent supervisor

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' (Archer 2003: 168). 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.

The profile of the ideal supervisor was linked to the perception of the supervisor as a manager who is very closely involved in all phases of the research project. This meant setting deadlines, checking progress, providing regular feedback on written work, helping arrange data collection, and even proofreading. In this respect, the extent to which the supervisor should provide direction was close to what Blanton (1983: XX), in connection with the PhD process, intriguingly describes as 'midwifing the dissertation'.

While this is what was generally desired, the large majority of participants felt completely abandoned by their supervisors and departments, and only a few individuals felt deeply supported as researchers, both during and after the PhD. The interview transcripts contain numerous examples of instances where participants struggled to get in touch with their supervisor to discuss their research. It was commonly shared that they would see their supervisor only rarely, and that it could take up to six months or more to have just one meeting. The idea that PhD students would meet with their supervisor at least two to three times per semester, as is the case in many non-peripheral higher education systems, seemed extremely remote to participants – and was even referred to as 'a luxury' (Dragan). The majority of the interviewed ECAs would have been satisfied with a much more modest commitment from their supervisors – seeing them at least once every couple of months.

Many participants believed that senior professors (i.e., supervisors) cultivated a 'busy image'. They were, however, not convinced that the problem with the lack of mentorship was due to the arduous schedule of their supervisors or the legislation in place that determines how many students one can supervise. Instead, they felt that this was more a sign of detachment and disinterest, and the fact that seniors do not feel either professional or personal responsibility to help them towards producing an acceptable PhD thesis, or any other type of research. Aleksandar was one participant who talked in detail about the difficulties in getting to schedule an appointment with his 'busy' supervisor. He was critical of their relationship and was convinced that his supervisor is absent because 'he does not want to find time, not that he has no time'. When finally he would be able to set up a meeting, Aleksandar complained about the poor quality of the discussion and the 'little constructive feedback'. The slow return of draft chapters was another thing that annoyed him. He mentioned having to wait one year for his supervisor to look at one chapter, and when he finally got it back, disappointingly found that 'the feedback was irrelevant'. He finished off by saying that 'many senior professors simply lack the ambition to offer support…and no systemic solution can fix that'. This sentiment, that the problem with mentorship is not just an issue of improving the system but also of 'fixing' a long-standing attitude held by senior academics, was quite common among participants, regardless of their institutional affiliation.

There were, however, exceptions to this picture. Several ECAs shared examples of having good relationships with supervisors and reported positive instances of support. Oliver, for example, talked about his mentor 'being present from the start' and 'offering outstanding support every day'. He explained how his supervisor was helping him navigate many of the challenges that came with doing research, mentioning things like providing literature to read, helping him network, offering timely feedback on writing, jointly publishing a paper and writing a project

proposal together. Similarly, Melita felt 'lucky' because her supervisor was not only available, but also 'a good match'. She talked about how she inherited his discipline of writing regularly, and how she learned from him that as a researcher one needs to be 'constantly present, because you either publish or perish'. Part of what she particularly appreciated was that she 'never felt subordinated. I never had to do his literature review, sort out his references, carry out his research…park his car, bring him coffee…if you know what I mean', things that she believed some of her peers are asked to do.

The power dynamics between ECAs and supervisors

What was particularly interesting was how the doctoral thesis topic was chosen by candidates and the extent to which it had to be negotiated with supervisors. The testimonies of most participants revealed that they had a high degree of freedom in making their own choice about what they were going to research. It was commonly believed that this was not because supervisors were trying to encourage autonomous behaviour, but because they had no interest in participating in the process of defining the topics or for that matter, any later stage. Several participants seriously doubted if their supervisors had actually read their doctoral work. In several cases, they reported how supervisors read significant parts of the thesis for the first time just weeks or even days before submission, which is another sign of the 'absent supervisor'.

Interestingly, however, despite being free to choose, almost all participants strategically aimed to select a topic aligning with the interests of their supervisor and the subjects that they teach, rather than simply choosing something that fits well with their own preferences. While ECAs were aware that this may cause them difficulties in taking ownership of the research project and struggling to accept it as their own, again there was a perception that it would be very

sensible and tactical to conduct their doctoral research by covering an issue connected to the field of work of their supervisor. This was based on their understanding that one might later get some benefits and privileges from their supervisors if they win their trust as loyal cadres. So even when supervisors were absent, rather than trying to break the partnership, ECAs accommodated to the constraints and tried to strategise by seeking 'situational adjustment' (Archer 2003: 67) and managing their dependency upon mentors in the best possible way.

On reason for trying to keep dependency alive was related to a fear of retribution. That is, if things go wrong and the supervisor feels offended by the critical remarks of the candidate concerning his/her absence, which might endanger the completion of the PhD and the overall career of the candidate. The other reason for seeking and nurturing dependency was based on the logic that supervisors, at one point, can be used as a capital to overcome barriers, since they are part of the PhD viva and have their say in the final decision. Unlike many non-peripheral systems where mentors (i.e. PhD supervisors) do not take part in the viva committee, in the Macedonian context they have an active role which, as participants explained, often informally extends to choosing other members of the committee and, more importantly, how they will eventually judge the work of the candidate.

As Brane explained, there are 'pros and cons' to the existing power dynamics. On the negative side, he talked about how the PhD viva can become 'a living nightmare' if the candidate is not on good terms with his/her supervisor. He, like many others, suspected that a displeased supervisor, with his/her power and authority, can influence the outcome of the viva and informally convince other members of the committee to follow his/her decision. On the positive side, he believed that 'a proud supervisor' who is supportive of the candidate can, through the same channels of informal influences, negotiate a 'smooth viva'. In this respect, it is clear that

those candidates with supportive supervisors might get rewarded for serving their 'apprenticeship' and for their loyalty, while those who have more troubling relationships can clearly end up being the losers or silent victims.

Participants claimed that attempts at influence via supervisors are, in one way or another, a common practice, rather than infrequent incidents. In fact, very few participants believed that the work of PhD candidates is judged impartially and solely on the basis of their writing. As Ruza note: 'it is very difficult to finish without any problems if a senior does not have your back. It is the rule of the game that your supervisor needs to support you and lobby for you for things to run without problems'. In such a context, ECAs seem to be incentivised to pursue dependency on a senior in order to potentially get a privileged treatment.

In many instances, in addition to seeking support through their supervisors, ECAs felt the need to act themselves as agents outside of the official rules and procedures, in order to satisfy their interests. This often meant directly, but very discreetly, attempting to communicate with members of the committee and informally asking them for advice or oral feedback before submission, despite this being forbidden. Those ECAs who reported doing so seemed to have a better sense of what they might expect from different members of the committee during the viva, for instance, what questions they might ask or what types of arguments they would like to hear or see in the thesis – and in the last instance, what their decision might be.

What is significant here is that both direct lobbying and attempts at influence via supervisors were not necessarily seen as a way of 'pulling strings' (Ledenva 1998) and unethical behaviour, but more as a survival strategy, and a 'mode of action' (Ferguson 2015), for ensuring some sort

of stability and certainty in a system that is perceived as unfair, where 'things can go wrong with the blink of an eye' (Tomas).

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 organised. 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 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.

For instance, Nikola talked about how networking with scholars from abroad 'opened new horizons' and helped him 'regain confidence and inspiration' for his doctoral thesis. Even though institutionally he did not get any credit for attending research conferences, he found them 'extremely valuable', not only because they allowed him to see 'where things are going' in his disciplinary field, but also because they offered a place where he could 'talk freely'. In this respect, by taking part in international conferences, seminars, and other types of research

events ECAs like Nikola were compensating for the things they missed out on locally. More importantly, these activities kept their research profile afloat in a system almost solely concentrated on teaching, where research is clearly on the margins.

But at other times, this type of international networking caused tensions and unhappiness in quite a specific way, because these experiences showed ECAs how an academic career can look elsewhere – producing an image that is desired but perhaps not entirely within their reach. An additional frustration was that attending such events regularly would be financially difficult or impossible.

For almost a half of the participants, their scholarly exposure and networking was strictly local, or at best regional - not because they did not understand or appreciate the value that international connectivity and networking can bring, but because they simply could not afford to cover the costs of attending events beyond close proximity. In this respect, the international profile of many ECAs was rather weak, and communication with the wider scholarly community was usually limited to other countries from the former Yugoslav region. Attending conferences not within close proximity required a lot of creativity and planning well ahead of time. This situation is described concisely by Zorana:

> I would like to attend more international conferences, but the problem is that there is no institutional support for it so I have to adapt and see what is financially feasible…I attend conferences in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, or look for a conference that has no fee or provides grants. I also try to find conferences that are accessible by low budget airlines which fly from Skopje…Last year I wanted to go to a 'big' conference in my field, but it was held in Finland, and the flight ticket was too expensive, so I decided to go to the same conference this year as it is held in Vienna, so there are some cheap flights to get there.

In this respect, it is evident that without sensible strategising financial issues can severely restrict the opportunities for ECAs on the periphery to expose themselves to new opportunities and to integrate academically beyond their home countries.

3. 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. The last of these is often characterised as somewhat less important, and the first two as existing in some kind of 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. Even those ECAs who reported 80h work weeks still found themselves running out of time, working until the last minute.

While the culture of working long hours was obviously detrimental to the health, happiness and morale of ECAs, it was in some cases interpreted as an indication of commitment to the institution and loyalty to the workplace, and as a sign that one is serious about his/her career intentions. In this respect, working long hours also symbolised ambition by which the individual was able to build good reputation and increase visibility. Conversely, resisting against working long hours held the danger of being labelled as being ‘lazy’.

'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. Such a pattern was noticeable quite consistently and regardless of the university, discipline or rank of participants.

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. This again reflects the theoretical perspective of Archer (2003), who suggests that structure and agency are inextricably linked, and demonstrates, as I have already suggested as part of my theoretical discussion, that there can still be a considerable scope for agency within the limits posed by structures.

A concrete manifestation of this nexus between structure and agency is evident from the experience of teaching shared by Iva. While he expressed his frustration at being forced into a teaching role, he nevertheless went on to say that he enjoys being independent in his teaching role:

> I'm forced into a teaching role, but I have full autonomy with regard to teaching delivery methods and I can definitely plan for myself how I do things in the classroom…It is a situation of joy and frustration. I'm not too happy that I have to teach so much, but at least I'm able to do it independently and by my own rules.

In discussing the great deal of time that she spends on teaching, Ana 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.

Referring to the present, as compared with the past, some ECAs, particularly those in Docent positions, reported that teaching took much less preparation. It was clear that over time, as participants became more experienced and comfortable in their role, teaching became 'less stressful' (Brane), 'intuitive' (Biljana), 'routine' (Zorana) and 'almost effortless' (Bisera). Consequently, the expression of agency also shifted over time: from focus on survival in the early days, to trying something new and more advanced (such as introducing a new syllabus, changing assignments, getting better feedback from students). As one participant indicated:

> When I started I felt very lost and everything was rather new to me. I returned home without much energy left for planning the next day of lessons, let alone for analysing my own teaching practice and what I was doing. Overtime, I managed to adapt to my role and as I increasingly felt more comfortable with what I was doing, I started looking at things that could improve my teaching practice. (Biljana)

At the same time, there were instances where ECAs fell into a comfort zone potentially harmful to their teaching practice, but emotionally more sustainable. As they became more experienced in their teaching role, the agency of these individuals seemed to change over time, shifting from a desire to make their teaching better, to merely delivering the curriculum. The question I address in the next section is what led to this progressive, and in many cases intentional, disengagement in the context of teaching.

Teaching on 'autopilot'

The reasons for 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.

For instance, Iva discussed increasingly teaching 'on autopilot', as her 'own personal *modus vivendi*' (Archer 2003: 16). She described this 'autopilot' mode as a form of emotional disengagement to cope with the workload pressures she was experiencing and to silently 'protest' for the way she is treated by management:

> 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.

This 'autopiloting' that Iva employs may seem 'mechanical' (Archer 2003: 143) at first, but in fact demonstrates how ECAs may act in ways designed to deliberately reduce their agency or

to leave it ‘unexercised’ (Archer 2003: 5), which, from a conceptual standpoint, suggests that a robust model of agency must also confront the individual’s refusal of agency. In present discussions of ECAs and their use of agency, this type of active refusal is rarely touched upon. Moreover, what Iva’s example illustrates is that ECAs who enter ‘autopilot mode’ do not necessarily become indifferent to their agency as teachers, but rather become disengaged from institutional structures and what they perceive as institutional indifference and a lack of recognition for their work.

In describing their disengagement, several participants directed their attention at what happens in the classroom and how much this matters regarding their level of engagement. ECAs frequently spoke about the decreasing quality of students coming in and the difficulty of getting these students ‘up to speed’. A widespread belief was that students are getting out of high school without the skills they need to succeed at university level. A related issue was that students often do not show up to class, since attending classes is usually not mandatory, and therefore students are not motivated to come to classes on a regular basis. The following quote from Filip summarises some of these issues:

> Teaching is a two-way process, I inspire students, and they inspire me. The feedback from students that serves to inspire me is disappearing. Since about three years ago it’s not mandatory for students to participate in classes, so now, by the time they reach second year, almost no one comes to classes. I’m not suggesting that we should force them to come to classes, but there should be an inbetween solution. Regardless of how much I invest and give, the feedback is not there from students anymore, and I feel defeated, reaching a dead-end every time. It slowly ruins me…Empty classrooms are just killing me.

Participants, particularly those teaching at private universities, remarked that only a few of their students show a deep interest in learning, while the others are simply there for ‘the degree stamp’ (Ruza). They contended that many students ‘just want to get by’ (Tina) and frequently

commented that private institutions are sacrificing quality for increased profits from fee paying students. A particular problem highlighted was that there are frequent pressures from management to pass undeserving students. These pressures ranged from the explicit – where one is asked to make changes to grades – to more subtle pressures, where the unwritten expectation is 'not to have too many F's' (Tina). Ljubica, for instance, talked about there being a lot of institutional pressure to 'just change a grade and not a lot of pressure to go in there and accurately measure what students do or do not know'. One time she was notified by management 'to change 5s (fail) to 6s (pass)…and the 6s needed to be changed to 7s or 8s'. While she was contemplating whether to comply, 'those low grades magically went up' anyway, as she explained.

In conclusion, participants who experienced less work pressures and more institutional recognition for their teaching role reported lower disengagement. In contrast, those who found little positive reinforcement in their present work were slowly disengaging. While most ECAs entered the academic profession very committed to teaching, this clarity of purpose was easily clouded by years of feeling disconnected, unsupported and unrecognised. Notably, it seemed that many ECAs disengaged quite covertly – by 'putting on a mask' (Alma) and pretending to look focused and engaged while actually being detached or at best on 'autopilot' (Iva) – so at the end of the day, their disengagement was typically left entirely unidentified and unmanaged by the institutions.

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. As Konrad explained in the interview: ‘one of the main handicaps of Macedonian higher education is that we have a very poor tradition in research and science’.

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 - which is quite considerable for an activity that is kept ‘invisible’ (Maja) through the operation of institutional pressures and structures directed towards teaching.

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. As weekdays are usually filled with teaching obligations, it is typically research that is relegated to ‘private time’ (Tomas) or to ‘every available minute left’ (Oliver). It was striking how many participants reported doing research outside of official working hours, frequently arriving early and staying late at work to ensure they can do some research.

What was evident from the experiences shared by ECAs is that they lived in a world of daily contradictions, facing the following dilemma: to either focus on teaching because it is ‘what earns the salary’ (Bisera), or to focus on research because it is ‘what gets you promoted’ (Bisera). Participants constantly emphasised the need to negotiate and ‘dovetail’ (Archer 2003: 326) the complex demands of teaching and research, and how trying to achieve both often resulted in feeling overworked, over-stretched, and constantly lagging behind. In that respect an ‘unholy alliance’ (Barnett 2009) between teaching and research was quite evident.

Focusing on both teaching and research simultaneously was seen as a particularly difficult task requiring a delicate act of balancing. Zlatan metaphorically compared it to 'walking on a high wire while doing a juggling act'. He went on to describe the pressures that this act of balancing created, and noted how 'even the smallest mistake can lead to drastic failure'. Despite this, Zlatan believed that he was left with no other choice but to find ways to strike a balance in order to preserve his academic position.

For several participants with a clear personal preference to do more research rather than teaching, the balancing act, and the challenges around it, played out differently. The dilemma evoked by these participants was how to maintain their research profile, while fulfilling institutional expectations and requirements to do teaching. It was evident that ECAs who had a research-oriented vision of the academic career often found very little institutional recognition of their research-focused identity.

For instance, Ruza described how she could 'not afford to become a better researcher' in a setting that clearly favours teaching. Like others, she talked about joining academia 'inspired to be working on research', yet soon realising that she would be 'mostly teaching'. Over time, given the institutional emphasis on teaching, she felt stagnation with her research. Not giving up on research, she believed, required living 'a double life'. In explaining this 'double life' she talked about protecting her research identity by concealing it, so as to avoid conflicts with university management:

> If you are doing research it's perceived as something that is not part of your job, that you are wasting precious time that could be spend on something else…When I'm reading a paper or writing something, I make it look like it's for teaching, otherwise I'll need to explain myself to management…I lead a sort of double life. I look like I'm focusing on teaching, but I'm actually spending time on research. I feel terrible that I cannot reveal my true identity

> and be accepted for who I really am and what I really love doing, but at the end of the day this is what allows me to do research.

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 now given to complete the PhD following changes to the Law on Higher Education made in 2012 – seemed impossible under present conditions where one needs to juggle between writing, teaching and doing administrative work. Talking about her PhD experience, Maja believed that it would require superhuman effort to finish her PhD in time, and asked:

> In five years? What can you actually do to complete a PhD? What kind superhuman is that? When do you find time to do other things: teaching, admin, life?

Among participants in Docent positions who were asked to talk about their PhD retrospectively, it was evident that finishing the PhD took longer than what is now expected. On average it took them almost seven and a half years to complete it. According to what was shared in interviews, before the new policy was introduced, 'it was normal for a PhD to take up to a decade' (Biljana). The previous model, which had no clear timeline or limit for completion, was often seen as problematic since 'submitting can take ages' (Zlatan). But at the same time, the fact that there was no time pressure made the 'process of writing more enjoyable and the quality of work higher' (Zlatan).

Interviewees, both Docents and Assistants, saw the newly-defined limit for completion within five years as very unrealistic in a situation where one needs to combine doctoral studies and academic employment. They often commented that while the policy aims to tackle the problem

of delayed PhD completion, it does not introduce support mechanisms that would help doctoral candidates who are also academic staff to achieve this, such as, for instance, protected time for writing, reduced teaching and administrative workload, financing of field work, or other types of support. This clearly places ECAs in a very difficult position to complete their PhD dissertation in a climate which for many years has been lacking the appropriate infrastructure, support and funding resources.

In the narratives of ECAs, it was clear that finding time for writing their PhDs was almost never situated in the present, and many times it was believed that it might materialise in the near future, as in the following quotes. 'I hope that in the summer I will start writing' (Glasna); 'I'm living in hope that I can continue writing in the spring' (Ognen); and if one does not succeed in the spring, then, so the logic goes, in the summer or in the autumn at the latest. In this context, it was quite evident that time for writing often belonged to the sphere of the anticipated future, since participants struggled to preserve time for it in the present.

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:

> I was hoping to finish my dissertation last year but I'm nowhere near finishing…My teaching responsibilities are holding up my progress. (Tamara)

> Another semester has gone by and that means that submitting by September is increasingly unrealistic…I'm forced to prioritise teaching and admin tasks so it's really hard to find time for my dissertation. (Jovan)

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. The few individuals with supportive supervisors offering different types of support - such as research techniques and academic writing, but also support in the development of process-related skills, such as planning and management, as well as emotional support – were more positive about their doctoral experience and seemed to be progressing with less troubles. On the opposite end, participants with unsupportive supervisors – who could not meet regularly, did not provide timely answers to questions via email and feedback on written work, and did not reassure students in stressful situations – were not only much less satisfied with their experience, but also reported significant delays, and even considered quitting academia altogether.

These experiences echo 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 (Devos et al. 2017; O'Meara et al. 2017; McAlpine and Amundsen 2018). At the same time, non-existent, limited, or poor academic support is related to dissatisfaction, longer completion times and dropout (Castelló et al. 2017;), but also to lower productivity and mental health problems such as worrying, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress (Cornwall et al. 2019).

Yet, there were also several extreme cases where more supervision and dependence on the supervisor was actively avoided. For instance, Ljupco preferred a 'total isolation' to having a contractual relationship with authority. He felt that a more closely engaged supervisor could slow down his progress. He feared that an active supervisor could potentially 'do damage' in

the event that they had a disagreement over the direction his research work should take. What his perception reveals is that increased supervision oversight and dependency on the supervisor may pose additional challenges, rather than mitigating existing ones (as discussed earlier).

PhD research: quality, impact and originality

Faced with the risk of losing their contract if they did not finish within five years, the focus of many PhD students fell on simply finding time to complete their research rather than producing research of high standards. The fact that ECAs were overloaded with other commitments meant sacrificing quality and academic rigour when it comes to their PhD, and research work in general. They could 'foresee the impediments that…[they] would encounter [if they focused on quality and rigour] and thus…[were] deterred from pursuing them' (Archer 2003: 6). In this respect, what becomes clear is that to effectively evade the risk of potential failure, ECAs intentionally reduced their aspirations and focused their attention on what is practically achievable.

The kind of impact their research would have, on their field or on the general public, was not something that many participants worried about. This was almost equally the case both for those working on arguably less socially-applicable areas of research and those working in more applied areas. 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 and Amundsen 2018).

The issue of research originality, or more precisely the extent of originality to be aimed for, is worth mentioning here. Commonly, participants noted that originality is not something that they necessary aim for, whether writing research papers for rank promotion or writing their doctoral thesis – which again points to a difference from ECAs in non-peripheral higher education systems where individuals are more intensely dedicated to the pursuit of research excellence and originality, or are at least more pressured to predict and measure the impact of their research (Fenby-Hulse et al. 2019).

A primary factor militating against aiming for highly original work was the high workload, which makes original work almost impossible to achieve. As Ana explained:

> There is no guarantee that I will finish on time if I try to 'work wonders' with my [doctoral] thesis. I don't have the commodity of being able to sit down and process my ideas in a way necessary to produce original work.

In some cases, however, the level of challenge that goes with writing an original thesis was evidently appealing to certain individuals. For instance, Tomas looked at his doctoral project 'as a chance to be innovative and original'. He believed that his topic covers 'unexplored grounds' and he saw this as an opportunity to do a thesis which is 'totally out of the ordinary', for which he could be recognised:

> You know it was a simple choice for me: do I want to produce another thesis that looks at something which is very predictable or do I want to go into unexplored territory and do something totally out of the ordinary?

But even in cases where participants embarked on such innovative and original research projects, they shared many examples on how this negatively impacted their free time, or altered the relationship between them and their supervisor. At the same time, a common concern was whether novel ideas are accepted and well received 'in an institutional environment known for

its conservatism' (Ruza). A few participants shared anecdotes of instances where they had difficulty getting innovative approaches accepted by their supervisors or by examiners during the PhD viva. It was thus perceived that going for originality might prevent candidates from attaining their research degrees with relative safety and within the acceptable time frame. In this respect, the dilemma around the extent to which an ECA should aim for original work on the one hand, or conforming work on the other, was a very real one, and necessitated careful strategising.

Satisfying research promotion criteria and ways to play the system

Similar to the reform of the PhD process, the legislative amendments to the Law on Higher Education in 2011 imposed much stricter benchmarks for promotion, with a strong emphasis on international research outputs. As explained in Chapter 6, while candidates in the past were required to publish an insignificant number of papers (or none at all), today they are expected to produce internationally relevant research in leading journals in order to get promoted.[12]

A commonly stated concern among participants was that, taking into account the low research orientation of the system and the lack of resources for research, it is unrealistic to expect the fulfilment of criteria based on the assessment of research achievements. Publishing in international journals was reported to be mostly beyond reach for several reasons: lack of funding to compete with other researchers abroad, limited access to literature, poor institutional

[12] For obtaining promotion from an Assistant to a Docent position: a minimum of four papers published in international journals, or at least two papers published in impact factor journals, indexed in the Web of Science, in the last five years. For obtaining a promotion from a Docent position to an Associate Professor: a minimum of five papers published in international journals or three papers published in impact factor journals, indexed in the Web of Science, in the last five years.

support and preparation for conducting serious research, weak international contacts and in some cases poor English-language abilities.

Interviewees found it ironic, to say the least, that they did not have access to the very same journals they were required to publish in. The fact that only one of the four institutions covered by my study was partially subscribed to a single scientific database provides explicit evidence concerning the ability of ECAs to stay in touch with the latest scientific literature, or any literature for that matter, at least from official channels. One of the things that was really interesting is that many ECAs were finding alternative ways to get access to the literature they needed, and this was mostly done by using 'Sci-Hub' as a site to illegally download copyrighted research papers for free.[13]

Despite encountering challenges connected to meeting the research requirements, ECAs did not view the introduction of research criteria for promotion as inherently bad. Several ECAs stated that the increasing emphasis on research was welcomed as a necessary step to catch up with the more research-oriented Western European universities. Some participants, such as Maria, more radically considered that the research criteria for promotion should be even stricter, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak:

> If you ask me, I would set the bar even higher so we can finally see where we stand in comparison to academics abroad, but more importantly to see who deserves to be here and who doesn't.

The majority of those recognising the importance of research, however, believed that the criteria for promotion, as they stand at the moment, are not realistically designed or carefully

[13] Using shadow library websites was seen as morally justifiable not only because legal ways of accessing papers were restricted, but because of a firm conviction that scientific papers should be open access.

adapted to the teaching-oriented university culture in North Macedonia. In this context, achieving the necessary criteria was seen as very problematic – and from what participants shared, it seemed that the new reform made them think of different illicit ways around it, rather than actually trying to meet the criteria in the way imagined by the State.

In reducing the risk of not meeting the formal research requirements for promotion, ECAs talked about there being space for abusing or playing the system. Specifically, it concerned submitting papers to journals that were locally established, but which satisfied the requirements of an international journal as determined by the law (defined as having an editorial board from at least four different countries). Alma explained how this works:

> These journals are specifically made for this purpose…they are made-up journals, they function in the same way as predatory journals, there is no peer review, and many people use them to get their work published.

From my sample, three participants openly admitted that they published either once or several times in such journals in order to satisfy criteria that they believed are otherwise unattainable. While others did not disclose having used this practice of publishing themselves, they perceived it to be a widespread practice.

Ball (2007) refers to such practices under the heading of what he calls 'fabrication', where academics are strongly incentivised to create fictional accounts of what they have done to fit the targets that they know they are going to be inspected on. Thus, in line with Ball's argument, some ECAs in North Macedonia produce publications that give the impression that they are doing what they are expected to be doing. Hence, there are reasons to believe that instead of making academics more accountable and productive, the pathological effect of the new policy for international publishing is contributing to the creation of the very opposite.

In this context, it seems that the structural system itself inevitably invites ECAs to engage in corrupt workings and forces them to 'act strategically to try to discover ways around it…[and] to get the most out of propitious circumstances' (Archer 2003: 6). So a question worth asking is whether this illicit conduct of publishing can be easily labelled as 'corrupt', or perhaps more accurately seen as a necessary 'accommodative' (Archer 2003: 237) response to the unrealistic expectations that the system has placed on ECAs. What my findings certainly make evident is that creating a certain type of 'coercive accountability' (Shore and Wright 2000: 57) through policy without offering the appropriate support cannot simply produce more meritocratic outcomes, but can only increase professional cynicism.

Administration: '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.

Participants were not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about administrative duties and believed that time spent on this type of work was a major distraction from teaching and research. In this context, a disinclination towards administrative work was quite evident since it came at the expense of core academic activities. Moreover, this workload was perceived to create additional stress and frustration, and prompted some of the most bitter comments – '100% irrelevant' (Iva), 'nonsense' (Ana), 'excessive and pointless' (Borkica) or 'extremely

demoralising' (Konrad). The following quote from Dragan articulates the disinterest in administration expressed by ECAs, and the negative emotions associated with this type of work:

> So much of my work is administrative. I didn't sign up for this. I don't see any added value to my academic work by doing all this admin. It's a waste of time and stresses me out. I can't focus on what really matters.

The biggest challenge when it comes to administrative duties was how to stay on top of things while still being able to conduct teaching and research at the same time. Konrad talked about how administrative work left him 'feeling like Sisyphus', as he endlessly tried 'to catch up and finish things' only to come to understand that he is 'constantly falling behind'. 'Whenever you think you have rolled it a little way up, down it comes and rolls you over. You then must start all over again'.

The feeling that administrative work is an endless and perpetual rock-pushing up a hill was common among participants. In some instances, ECAs held the same feeling about teaching and research, especially when they felt stagnant in these roles and experienced barriers to career progression. The combination of different work-related pressures – around teaching, research and administration – also had an important bearing on such Sisyphus-like experiences.

The tasks that were typically defined as administrative were varied and broad in nature. The long list of tasks mentioned by participants included things such as: creating teaching timetables, handling university documentation, various kinds of reporting, attending staff meetings, note taking, marking student essays, updating students e-portfolios, advising students on administrative matters, writing letters of recommendation, helping out senior professors, and more.

Remarkably, 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 and Sandström 2015).

It is also remarkable that none of the ECAs I 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.

Many participants believed that they are assigned duties that should be performed by non-academic personnel. Reflecting on the general perception of participants, Aleksandar stated the following:

> This is nonsense! Instead of employing more administrative staff, this type of bureaucratic work is distributed to us young academics.

Due to a shortage of administrative staff, it is ECAs that are most likely to be on the receiving end of more responsibilities. As Maja explained, the situation is often worsened by the conduct of senior professors who 'expect you to take over some of their own teaching and administrative assignments'. Many other participants shared having a similar problem and talked about the surprisingly high tolerance of this type of behaviour within their institutions, which in some cases made them feel that their job is to be 'a professor's secretary' (Tina). Interviewees believed that the informal powers which seniors hold include those that allow them to act this way. What this makes clear is that the hierarchical culture of Macedonian academia has become a fertile breeding ground for intellectual exploitation.

'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 both Bisera's and Oliver's accounts of their 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. (Bisera)

> 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. (Oliver)

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: 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 and Amundsen 2018).

While having a routine often provided a framework which encouraged productivity, in some instances it also shut down opportunities for continuous learning and development. Due to the high volume of work, the goal of a routine often appeared to be to 'finish as much as you can' (Glasna), rather than to learn how to do things better or to incorporate something new. In this

respect, there seemed to be a thin line between having a routine and performing duties in a way which may easily turn into complacency, apathy and boredom.

There were also ECAs, although in much fewer numbers, for whom the lack of typicality worked well and who consciously tried to avoid setting a routine. For instance, Laze looked at routine as 'painfully boring' and feared that having one 'can easily slide into monotony…like Groundhog Day, the movie'. He went on to say that doing the same thing over and over again can quickly become tedious even for the most passionate academics.

For other participants like Melita, having a cyclical and repetitive schedule came into conflict with her wish for personal growth and discovery, and desire to gain greater flexibility and freedom over the use of her time. She believed that not having a fixed schedule allowed her to do things outside of work and achieve a better work-life balance. But then, later on in the interview, she also referred to trying to establish some type of normalcy and routine to her daily schedule, which contradicted her earlier rhetoric: 'I try to divide my day into three distinct blocks of time – teaching, research, admin…Having such blocks makes my work far more tolerable'.

One of the hidden costs of not having a set weekly schedule is that every week can easily turn into 'a seven-day work week' as Filip explained. Flexibility means, as Filip continued, that 'you are always at work…you are always on'. The 'always on' work culture that Filip described seemed to be relatively common among participants, although not all participants felt it to the same extent. For some, it meant replying to work-related emails and calls out of the traditional 9 to 5 working office hours, and working while on holiday, while for others it meant 'being available 24/7' (Tomas) to mark essays, to write reports, to jump in as a replacement teacher

at the very last minute. The obvious consequence of being 'always on' and available for work is that it prevented ECAs from unwinding.

Overall, the analysis of the weekly activities described by participants showed that they were highly variable in a way that could not be predicted by the position's title, institutional setting or the discipline of ECAs. In fact, what was clear from the accounts of ECAs is how heterogenous patterns of daily life can be. Moreover, descriptions from participants suggest that predictable work rhythms and habits were seen to have a positive effect on productivity, and were often presented as a key that might create a successful present and a path towards a more stable future. Although a few ECAs preferred having less standardised schedules, it was evident that this way of living often led to amplified feelings of distress and anxiety, and created difficulties for achieving a work-life balance.

Striking a work-life balance

The question of how to combine work with other areas of life was a frequent thread in the interviews with ECAs. Reflections on achieving some form of work-life balance appeared mainly in the negative form, as something which is very hard to do. The pressing challenge for ECAs seemed to be figuring out what strategy works best for them in balancing between a variety of day-to-day schedules – professional and personal. This is manifested, for instance, in the following quote from Tomas:

> Finding a way to balance between time devoted to work and other important aspects of life is anything but easy. The majority of us struggle with it. Almost everyone else I know at my level is in the same situation…Aligning these in the right way is quite an undertaking.

References to a struggle to achieve a balance were particularly numerous among participants who have started families of their own. The present pace of academic work was frequently described as being incompatible with having children and being a parent. Several ECAs referred to their family time having suffered significantly due to their long working hours. The time for family gatherings or hanging out with friends was often taken over by marking essays, doing research and writing, or preparing the powerpoint presentation for tomorrow's class. Consequently, many worried that by choosing to have an academic career, they are passing up on opportunities to enjoy other segments of life.

Some interviewees, however, seemed to have found a balance in which work does not fully overtake life. For Teodora this meant becoming more selective in her daily work commitments and 'getting better at prioritising the important bits of my work'. Likewise, Glasna talked about making a conscious effort in setting 'clear boundaries between work and leisure', and 'keeping Sundays work free'. These boundaries for Oliver were constructed by engagement in non-academic activities and interests, such as exercising, reading, socialising and through engagement with his partner and family. In the case of Iva, it was making 'internal peace with the fact that you can't do everything' and 'figuring out what works best for you and your family'. Laze alluded to the fact that securing time for leisure is imperative for being able to perform his academic duties:

> It's like when you run a marathon. You must take a water break. It's the energy from that water that helps you keep running. It is basically the same with academic work. You need those 'water breaks' to be able to perform well.

Several ECA talked about shifting their '*modus vivendi*' (Archer 2003: 148) and 'hierarchy of concerns' (Archer 2003: 194) over time, with greater focus on spending time with their family today than in the past. For Irena this happened when her first child was born, and for Ljupco

when he got married. As Irena explained, one positive aspect of becoming a parent is that 'it focuses your mind in ways that allow you to change your working pattern as your personal life changes'. In the same way, Ljupco talked about getting married and moving in with his fiancée as the point in time when he realised the importance of taking time off from work. For those participants who were unmarried and without children there was an 'ultimate concern' (Archer 2003: 179) about how, in the future, they would manage roles related to having a family.

A chilling aspect of the experiences shared by interviewees is that financial difficulties reduced the quality of ECAs' free time and added significant constraints on how it can be used. Glasna for instance, explained how she must make hard decisions about the leisure activities that she could partake in:

> My salary is so low that I can hardly pay for cultural events, go to concerts, restaurants or go on vacation . . . So even when I have free time there is not much that I can do with it.

Glasna's case is an important reminder of how the issue of workload is not the only one that takes its toll on personal time, and how other types of constraints (such as financial considerations) can severely impact the achievement of a more satisfying work-life balance. This aspect is largely overlooked in the literature concerning ECAs, where attention on the issue of work-life balance has been primarily concerned with considerations of how heavy workloads limit the use and quality of personal time.

4. 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. While participants would immediately jump into describing their everyday past and present, when it comes to the future they often had to pause and think. At times, ECAs

gave very short answers and needed to be invited a second time to expand on this aspect of their stories in more detail. In the process, they were going back over their prior hopes, re-evaluating their current experiences and ultimately confronting their doubts and fears about their possible future.

A future marked by uncertainty

Thinking about the day-to-day future, as many ECAs pointed out, was something they usually did not have any time for. The long work hours and the feeling of constantly 'running between tasks' (Konrad) 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 'fractured' (Archer 2003: 298) ECAs' ability to engage in 'imaginary conversations' (Archer 2003: 171) and to forecast how their everyday lives might look like in the future. In her research on academic staff in Finland, Ylijoki (2010: 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? (Maja)

While some participants like Maja simply did not have time to think about the future, others intentionally tried to avoid having such 'internal conversations' (Archer 2003: 16) in which they would look further and deeper into it. In practical terms, these participants feared that thinking about the future could result in more anxiety and discomfort. This conscious act of refusal to anticipate the future, however, seemed to work only for a short moment. In the long

run it had the potential to severely amplify stress and indecision, and to reduce the space for agency:

> The easiest choice to make is to just not think about it [the future]. I've tried it a hundred times. But ignoring the fact that the time will come when I will eventually have to face this future is scary as hell. At some point you will pay the price for ignoring it…Situations like this make me feel paralysed (Nikola)

The message in Nikola's response appears to be that a simple strategy of denying the future, or more precisely, of ignoring thinking about it, carries the risk of feeling unable to act upon it and change it. Those ECAs who seemed to understand this risk of 'passivity' (Archer 2003: 311) were often in a better position to manage the way in which it might unfold, or to at least prevent certain negative outcomes from unfolding.

Perceptions and hopes for the future

For some ECAs, the day-to-day future was tied to the perception that things might improve as time moves forward. For instance, Oliver, who experienced overwork, believed that this would be a 'passing phase which will be over within a couple of years'. He considered that the sacrifice of working long hours as an Assistant is worth making as he expected a much lighter workload once he gets promoted to a Docent. However, this anticipation of change and hopes for a 'contextual discontinuity' (Archer 2003: 228) that Oliver had was not readily evident from the interviews with those ECAs who were Docents.

The analysis of the data suggested that regardless of the position, there seems to be no easy escape from the current time constraints. In fact, Docents reported a very similar, and sometimes higher, workload as that which Assistants described. In some cases, the workload becomes lighter for Docents, but if a new Assistant is not hired as a replacement for them (and

usually they are not), the full workload is transferred. Because Docents also sit on governing committees at Faculty level, which is not the case for Assistants, the workload often can in fact become heavier than it previously was.

What we know from previous research is that having 'unrealistic agents' (Archer 2003: 320) with a naively 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.

Several other ECAs, however, did not share high hopes for the future and instead reflected on their future day-to-day work situation more pessimistically, based on 'the accumulation of experiences' (Archer 2003: 176) from their past and present. These participants referred to their hopes of slowing down the pace of daily work as an ideal which would be very difficult to obtain. Further, they welcomed having more work-free time in the future, but as Filip explained, 'within the current landscape such a desire might be a bit utopian'. What is encouraging, however, is that though some ECAs had negative dispositions about the future, not even the most pessimistic participants felt that a grey-looking future is completely inescapable and unavoidable.

Regardless of whether participants had a more optimistic or a more pessimistic outlook on what the future may bring, many times, in thinking about it, they found consolation and strength in being able to handle difficult situations in the present and the past. In this respect, building

resilience over time was a source of pride and an important factor in being able to sustain motivation in difficult times and to manage setbacks and disappointments. In a related fashion, participants believed that previous experiences and what they have learned from them can help provide some coherence and stability in the future – or at least make better sense of it.

Breaking the mould, or repeating the same mistakes?

One of the 'ultimate concerns' (Archer 2003: 191) of ECAs when contemplating the future goes to the heart of the classic structure-agency debate: whether they as individuals (or collectively) have the power to change the system, or whether the system will eventually change them? The key dilemma for ECAs in this respect was whether, over time, they will 'internalise' (Archer 2003: 196) structures and repeat the same patterns of behaviour once they get into more senior roles and start occupying positions of institutional power, or whether they will be able 'to see and act differently' (Archer 2003: 157).

Unsurprisingly, and quite apparently, the different experiences of marginalisation and exploitation, the haphasard work conditions, and the lack of role models in institutions had a very destructive effect on ECAs' ability to visualise the future, and reduced their optimism, or more precisely, their confidence of being able to 'break the mould of the current system' (Ruza). A looming fear for many participants was whether they might not themselves eventually become the absent supervisor, the exploitative professor, and ultimately end up treating ECAs in the same way as they are currently being treated.

> I often worry if I'll end up perpetuating the values and attitudes of seniors that I've been so critical of, you know, things like not showing up for supervision, giving my Assistant 50 subjects to teach… I'm quite sure that many who joined the profession 20 or 30 years ago were also thinking that they will do things differently from the generation before, but eventually did quite similar things… I think there is space for change that many of us from the younger generation

> can achieve, but I'm honestly worried that 20 years from now I'm going to end up making the same mistakes. (Julijan)

Like Julijan, many other participants had a feeling that in the future they could set new standards and change how the institutional system works. At the same time, they were concerned that the system, as it currently stands, is strong enough to uphold its values and to assure 'contextual continuity' (Archer 2003: 173), making it inevitable for the individual to adapt.

While none of the participants mentioned attempting to arrange a mass protest or public campaign to voice discontent regarding how the current system works, many interviewees spoke with great, and often critical, awareness of their role as potential catalysts for transformation. As 'meta-reflexives' (Archer 2003: 255), they provided evidence of discontent that they have already done in both explicit and implicit ways: by filing an official complaint, writing op-eds for newspapers, organising events on socially sensitive topics, changing how they teach, making themselves available to students, or displaying greater scholarly openness and appreciation for criticism.

Finally, participants spoke of making change happen as a kind of 'generational commitment' (Nikola). While they seemed to believe that building a collective sense of agency could, somewhat idealistically, lead to a moment of awakening, they did not disregard what they as individuals can more incrementally do to act as a force of change. In fact, it was quite evident that they felt a passion to lead and contribute to change and did not accept the present structure of the system as an inevitable and 'deterministic' (Archer 2003: 122) fate.

5. Conclusions

In this chapter, my aim was to understand the variety and complexity that characterises 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. Further, I addressed how ECAs create, influence and manage their day-to-day working schedules and broader lives in relation to their personal preferences and institutional, national and other pressures.

Overall, the experiences shared by participants about their day-to-day lives present a rather gloomy picture of the everyday realities of Macedonian academia. Since their earliest days in the profession, ECAs seemed to be experiencing work as a major source of stress and felt like they were 'being thrown into the fire'. One of the most surprising findings was how many ECAs were 'left alone' to teach and to do research. 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.

The early independence that most ECAs had was identified either as a constraint or as a resource. To some it brought pleasure, to others it brought pain and discomfort. In every case, it showed that ECAs' agency is present, dynamic and responsive to what happens within the given environment. However, my findings have indicated that the well-being of ECAs was not necessarily higher when they perceived themselves to have greater independence and control over their work – which is another key element of difference between the experiences of ECAs in peripheral and non-peripheral higher education systems. In fact, most ECAs tended to prefer being heavily supported in their roles and sought dependencies to overcome barriers, but to

serve this preference they had to consciously set and maintain boundaries as a way of avoiding being ‘exploited’, ‘terrorised’ and ‘overworked’ by seniors and management.

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’ (Archer 2003: 189) 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. 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. The invisibility of research usually meant that research had to be relegated to private time, which also meant sacrificing evenings, nights, weekends, holidays – time that would otherwise be spent with family and friends. In this context, the findings also highlight the conflicting demands of work and life on the day-to-day basis, and the difficulties of striking a work-life balance.

The workload required from ECAs a constant re-considering of how to deal with the multiple pressures and of which licit or illicit techniques would work best within a particular situation. Rushing from one thing to another, multitasking and juggling tasks also influenced ECAs' ability for 'reflexive deliberation' (Archer 2003: 25). The same things did not allow them to think beyond the 'now and here' and to imagine the future. In this context, the accelerated pace of work and the amount of work that needed to be taken care of daily made long-term future planning very difficult, and indeed made the future look uncertain. In consequence, the present seems to resemble short-term survival strategies, within which reflection on the future hardly comes to the forefront.

In Archer's terminology, this chapter demonstrated how ECAs not only 'animate' their roles (Archer 2003: 288) - that is, act them out in accordance with institutional structures - but also 'personify' their roles 'in a unique manner' (Archer 2003: 296), using their initiative, finding time to seek out what interests them, learning and coming to their own conclusions, and making decisions about what course of action to take.

CHAPTER 8

THE CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF ECAS: INTENTIONALITY, DEPENDENCE AND AMBIVALENCE

Melita has worked in Macedonian academia for seven years so far, all at the same private institution in which she completed her previous studies. While she had a long interest in teaching, she did not imagined an academic career until receiving an invitation from a professor to apply for a position. In 2016, she was promoted from an Assistant position to a Docent one. In addition to hard work, she characterised luck and timing as significant factors behind getting promoted. While job security increased after the promotion, uncertainty about what lies ahead remained an issue for her as the criteria for promotion is frequently changing. In terms of her thinking about her future career, she desires to remain in academia, though remaining open to a change in the future.

1. Introduction

Melita's story, one collected during my research, captures the events and experiences that I cover in this chapter. Specifically, my aim is to provide a sense of the career trajectories of ECAs by examining their past and present experiences, and their intentions for the future. Situated within the structure-agency interplay, I focus on discovering the ways in which ECAs' career trajectories have unfolded as a result of their own interests and intentionality, and the extent to which structures and other sources of influence have an impact on their decisions, actions and thinking.

Regarding their past, in Section 2, I discuss the development of their interest in academic work and the people that were influential in shaping their career aspirations, the factors that attracted them to academic work, the individual pathways that led them into the professoriate, and the extent of intentionality at their time of entrance. In regards to their present, in Section 3, I discuss the present state of ECAs' careers and the sense of agency that they feel in constructing and advancing their careers, particularly in light of the promotion system in place. In this

section I also articulate the array of different structural factors – formal and informal – that participants believed influence the transition from one academic rank into another. Finally, in Section 4, I explore the career options for the future that ECAs put forward as personally desirable and contextually possible, both within and outside of academia. At the end of the chapter I offer conclusions which are developed further in the closing chapter of this thesis (Chapter 9).

2. The past: interest, attraction, entrance routes and intentionality

In this section, I retrospectively examine the past experiences of ECAs in order to understand how they recollected their choice to enter academia. Specifically, the conversations with participants focused on four main issues that I address separately below: how their interest in academic work developed and who were the most influential people and experiences that shaped their interest?; what were the main attractions to academic work?; how and when did they enter academia?; and how intentional was their choice to enter academia?

Development of interest in academic work and sources of influence

The interest in academic work most commonly developed during the course of their studies, particularly with those ECAs that reported rewarding experiences as students. Her undergraduate studies helped Maja discover a subject that she found 'inherently interesting' and this 'positive discovery' solidified her interest in an academic career. Brane had a similar realisation during his studies, as he found a subject of studies that is not 'boring', which later prompted him to consider academic work as a viable career option. For Irena, the appeal developed upon her return from a student exchange programme in Sweden, which had helped her to get an idea of academic work 'from a different point of view'.

Several participants developed an interest only after completing their degrees and leaving the academic setting - however, this was far less common. Filip, for instance, developed his interest in academia only after having first-hand experience with non-academic employment. His work experience in the civil society sector had helped him realise what he did not want to do, or as he explained: 'when you have an idea about what you don't like you start projecting ideas in your head about what you really like'.

Interactions within the academic environment also helped to refine interest in academic work. Several interviewees mentioned the important role that their own professors had played as sources of inspiration. Ruza recalled seeing one of her professors as a role-model, which encouraged her to think that she could one day 'be him'. Alma credited the positive reinforcement that she got from her undergraduate supervisor as a factor in bolstering her confidence that she was 'up to the standards' that academic work requires. Aleksandar made reference to his high school teachers as a source of inspiration, describing them as 'very devoted pedagogues with systematic and rigorous approach in teaching'.

For others, the interest in academic work stemmed from their childhood and family experiences. This was particularly true for a handful of participants that had at least one academic in their close family. Oliver said he had developed his interest in being a professor very early in his childhood. His grandfather was an academic, and having grown up in the same house alongside him he was 'fascinated by what he was doing'. He recollected his grandfather's desk as being 'full with piles and piles of books', which later got him interested in reading.

Similarly, Ognen described the development of his interest as being the result of the 'fortune to be raised in an academic family', as both his uncle and mother are academics. He felt that this academic surrounding was crucial in the discovery of his academic potential. Even among those participants that were not raised in so-called 'academic families', there was a clear influence from family-related experiences. Dragan remembered having multiple lively discussions on important social issues over dinner with his family. This gradually increased his curiosity in his subject and laid the foundations of his interest in academic work.

The ambition to become an academic in the case of Iva was connected with the social context in which she was raised as a child, and became a project of undertaking social mobility:

> I come from a poor family, and I was raised in a very difficult transitional social context. Both my mom and dad lost their jobs in the 90s' so for a very long time we lived on the pension of my grandfather. Both of them had only finished high school and never went to university. So I guess it was life itself that made me have a higher ambition…Even in primary school when all the kids were saying that they want to become pilots, doctors, firefighters, I said I would like to become a professor. I wanted to have more, I felt an ambition.

The aforementioned sources of influence developed largely in conjunction with the realisation of a personal sense of competence. Even though not always stated explicitly, most interviewees reported on developing progressively, and often early, a sense of personal competence that played an integral part in their interest in academic work. Some spoke of having an almost natural predisposition to a certain kind of work activity that they considered themselves to be good at, and that, often in unexpected ways, enhanced their self-perceived ability for academic work. For Maja it was her ability to write that had developed from a passion for poetry; for Ljubica it was her ability and confidence in presenting information in front of people.

Others referred to their success as students, which had helped them realise that they would likely excel as academics. Ognen spoke about being at the top of his class during his undergraduate and masters studies, which he perceived as a strong indication of his potential in academia. His academic success was an indication of what Konrad characterised as a recognition of his ability to 'swim with the big fish'.

Inherent attractions to academic work

Participants were drawn to academia by a constellation of attractions. The largest number talked about a general attraction to the academic lifestyle. Autonomy, intellectual freedom and flexibility were some of the most compelling attributes associated with this lifestyle. The ability to pursue personal interests and ambitions due to the perceived flexible schedule that academic work affords was often articulated by interviewees in this group. Iva expressed his attraction to the freedom that comes with the academic job to 'do things that I prefer, when I prefer and how I prefer'. Glasna spoke of a 'sense of personal independence' and 'a privilege in pursuing knowledge for its own sake' that is difficult to find in other professional contexts.

Linked closely to a strong need for autonomy was the investigative pleasure of doing academic work and the scholarly curiosity that comes from the tasks associated with academic work. This usually came across in the interviews as enthusiasm or passion for teaching and research. Those who were attracted to pursuing an academic career primarily through their interests in teaching talked of the possibility to transfer knowledge, engage with students, or simply share the love of the subject matter with others. Whereas those fuelled by a desire for research expressed views analogous to what Slobodanka described as her 'need to address intellectual puzzles', or what Julijan referred to as an 'internal impulse for curiosity to pursue answers to complex issues'.

Somewhat surprisingly, many ECAs described their passion for research as an important element that attracted them to the profession even though teaching is the principal activity pursued within universities. Administration, the third major component of academic work, did not figure prominently. In addition, very few interviewees pointed to the engagement in civic discourses and topics of social importance as an attraction in joining the professoriate. A rare exception was Iva, who talked about having a 'sense of a mission' as a way of making a difference in people's lives and improving society. Tina also spoke of the academic profession as a rare one where you can have a 'strong impact on the lives of others'.

Also attractive to many was the allure of the academic work environment. Beyond a general attraction to the nature of academic work, participants described being drawn by particular characteristics of the university setting (such as 'the intellectual surrounding' and 'dealing with students', and so on). Oliver was attracted to the idea of being able to 'sit down with someone, drink coffee, discuss ideas, talk about the things that I am interested in and that being part of my job'. For Teodora, it was the combination of having 'opportunity to engage in discussions' and being part of a collegial community where one is 'helping and [is] being helped'. Others described a particular feel or vibe created by being surrounded with students that is particular to universities. Ruza mentioned being attracted by the idea of 'being in a circle of students' which creates a 'special kind of energy'.

Joining the professoriate: internal recruitment and informal ties

In order to gain an understanding of the career pathway of participants, I asked them to recount how and when they entered academia. Three distinctive entry routes emerged from the data.

The first and largest group of ECAs (almost two-thirds of participants) mentioned being initially, and often informally, invited by a professor who knew them as a student to apply for a position in the professor's department – a practice of informal ties which obviously encourages internal recruitment and puts outsiders in a disadvantaged position. Many ECAs talked about how they already knew when they were students that this is a common route. As one of the participants, Denis, explained, getting invited required a high degree of initiative on his part during classes, in order 'to get noticed and remembered'. He had had a strong ambition to join academia from the very beginning of his Bachelor studies, so in hoping to make himself more visible to seniors, his strategy was to be active as much as possible in classes and to get good grades. Similar to Denis, many other participants were aware that obtaining good grades in Bachelor's and Master's studies was a necessary entry ticket and understood the importance of keeping good terms with senior professors, as their entrance into academia remains critically dependent on them and their ability to negotiate an opening.

ECAs commonly spoke with pride about being among the highest achievers in their studies, and mentioned receiving honours or other rewards that had served as recognition of their academic potential and ability. This suggests that in the Macedonian context, the informal competition for entrance starts early on, during studies, and requires that students act on their academic aspirations quite fast. While this is a relatively common trend which we find in other non-peripheral contexts regarding ECAs' careers (McAlpine et al. 2014), what is different is the understanding of opportunity structures – that potential jobs are internal (rather than external) to the institution. Evidently, most ECAs in my sample had their career horizons reduced to a single institution from the very beginning – typically the one where they commenced their studies; while ECAs elsewhere tend to choose (and are encouraged to do so) between different external options (Jazvac-Martek et al. 2011).

Once a promising student gets informally invited to join a Department, an open call for recruitment is announced, but this is typically just a formality if the applicant already has the support, encouragement, and recommendation of a senior member of staff. So in reality, while formal procedures exist, quite often the selected candidate is already known before the competition takes place, which explains that recruitment practices are guided by entrenched informal conventions.

When hired, ECAs typically start their PhD under the supervision of the professor who invited them, and serve as Assistants for the subjects that they teach. It is not uncommon for some ECAs to start teaching already during their Master's studies – which is not very typical for non-peripheral higher education systems, where teaching starts either during the PhD or post-PhD. However, the l changes to the Law on Higher Education from 2012 require Assistants to be enrolled in a PhD programme. Considering that students enter the academic profession rather early, the selection of candidates seems to be based more on a forecast and anticipation that the individual holds potential rather than on the actual skills and experience required for the position.

A second and smaller group of ECAs (less than a third) entered academia without having any previous connections to the institution or acquaintance with a member of staff, and were usually working in private universities. Most of them began the search process with a sense of agency that was quite different from those that were identified and invited to join academia by their own professors. As in the case of Iva, it typically involved sending a resumé either to the Dean or the Rector of the university for an unadvertised position. Other ECAs similarly described the process of hiring as being characterised by direct negotiations, where the decision is made on a case-by-case basis according to the current needs of the institution.

The career possibilities for those participants initiating their careers this way were, of course, curbed by the reality of internal recruitment, which discouraged many of them from seeking positions at particular institutions. A remarkable proof of this is that none of the ECAs who completed their studies within private institutions ever tried to apply for a position at a public university. In the search process, their horizons of action were limited to positions strictly in the private domain of higher education, as they perceived themselves to have little or no chance of success in the public sector. Phrases such as 'closed circle' or 'beyond reach' were common in describing this sentiment.

Opportunities for mobility from a less prestigious to a more prestigious university were also seen as being limited. Factors such as the importance of personal ties and the dominance of localised and pro-forma competition were part of the impressions shared by these ECAs. As a result, all ECAs who worked at the newer and less prestigious universities could hardly imagine themselves getting hired by an older elite institution. This was not because they questioned their own qualifications and academic capacity, but rather was directly connected to the practice of internal recruitment. As Ana explained, she never attempted to apply to a more prestigious public university as this would be 'a waste of my time' given her perception that institutions favour their own graduates. Similarly, Tina who works at a private university, did not make any effort to gain admission to any other institution as she believed that 'no outsiders are allowed'. Such views were rather widespread among interviewees.

The third and smallest group of ECAs entered the academic sphere through a more 'unorthodox' route by taking an administrative role within the university before jumping to an academic role. For instance, Alma initially applied for an academic job at the private university where she finished her Master's studies, but at that time no positions were available. As an

alternative, she secured an administrative job at the same university. After working for three years in the international office she felt that she was stagnating and so enrolled in a doctoral programme in order to jumpstart the potential of an academic career. Her strategy was to keep asking management if any new position in the area of her doctorate would soon become available, and to let everyone know from the Rector to the Dean and down to individual professors that she was serious about her academic aspirations. Eventually, after six months, a new Assistant position became available and she was hired. Her example clearly shows the importance of staying connected and how being internally positioned can be decisive in entering academia.

Regardless of the entrance route, what was common for most participants is that they entered academia quite young, often shortly after entering the second decade of their lives. Because of this early entry, only a few joined academia from an applied (non-academic) background or with a wealth of employment experience. In many cases, this was their first job offer, which made it easier to accept it. Another commonality is that participants typically entered academia from an entry-level Assistant position prior to obtaining a doctorate. Getting hired directly to a Docent position, i.e. postdoctoral, was fairly uncommon, especially at public universities where internal recruitment was more pronounced – confirming once again the impression that one needs to grow within the institution in order to be hired.

The role of intentionality, serendipity and impulsivity

For almost half of the participants in my sample, joining academia was a long-term wish and, as mentioned earlier, for many of them the appeal of the profession developed during their undergraduate and graduate studies. When confronted with the choice of an academic career,

these ECAs were more agentive and less impulsive than those who clearly did not imagine an academic career. For example, entering academia was always a first choice for Borkica. Becoming an academic was ‘a natural thing to do’, as she explained, and ‘one of the easiest decisions I have ever had to make’. During her studies at the private university where she now works, she realised that she has ‘a talent for transferring knowledge’ and that she enjoys teaching. This led her to the decision to enrol into a doctoral programme at the same university, which eventually resulted in her getting an offer for an Assistant position halfway through her PhD.

Denis, who is a Docent at a public university, also developed a strong ambition for the profession during his studies: however, as a student he believed that it would be very difficult to get a position ‘among so many bright students’. He did volunteer work with an NGO to try to boost his CV, and firmly believed that the extra-curricular activities he did helped him stand out from other potential candidates:

> I did a lot of extra-curricular activities, and I still believe that in some way they secured me this position. I kept investing in myself. Almost every day I was doing something in addition to my studies. I knew that in the long run this would be a big competitive advantage. When most of my friends had nothing to write in their CV’s I had plenty.

The account of Zorana below makes evident how aspirations and intentionality often intertwine with serendipity. She chose to do her undergraduate studies in a STEM subject area because it seemed to offer a promising future. During her studies she developed a sense of direction and positioned herself towards a sound choice of pursuing a career in education. She stated that her initial aspiration was to become a high school teacher, however, being one of the better students of her generation expanded her imagined career horizons. After finishing her Master’s studies she applied for several scholarships and started a doctorate in a Western European country with

a plan to pursue an academic career. The decision to do her doctoral studies abroad was made not only to enhance her career opportunities, but also to broaden her personal horizons. She looked at the opportunity as one which offered her a chance to 'grow in wisdom and perspective', while getting 'exposed to ideas and a lifestyle that I have never considered before'. While appreciative of her experience abroad, her goal all along was to pursue an academic career at home. In the last year of her PhD she started applying directly to a couple of private universities. She did not apply for public ones as she perceived herself to have little chance of success despite her international educational experience.

She went for the first offer made to her by one private university, where she stayed working as a Docent only for a year. Looking back from today's perspective she felt that this was perhaps not 'the optimal decision', but that her 'desire to become financially independent' was an important factor that had led her to such an action. As matters did not improve, she became critical of the situation and later changed to another private university (where she worked for another year), before finally making it to the private university where she currently works.

Being the only participant in the study with more than two relocations, and one of few that have experienced any relocation, I asked Zorana to reflect on her uncommon trajectory. Not surprisingly, the relocations were a source of considerable frustration and disruption – which is how many ECAs in non-peripheries also describe relocation (McAlpine 2012). However, she also considered relocation as a positive factor in supporting her intentions to find 'a place of belonging' (Archer 2003: 145). She described her first and second relocation as intentional, and the third as resulting from serendipitious happenings - even though it actually seems to be influenced partly by her agency and as a result of her networking. She described her salutary experience in this way:

> Of course it was not easy to move because that produced and is still producing various sorts of trouble for me regarding my promotion to an Associate Professor… But I stick to the saying that 'fortune favours the brave' and bravery requires action. I couldn't just close my eyes and hope for better days. As much as I regret going for the first position that was offered to me, that position helped me to network and meet people, and that opened up other opportunities. But I took advantage of 'the luck factor' only because I was not afraid to explore opportunities. If you just sit and wait no luck will help you.

For several other ECAs, the start of their academic careers was not an intentional choice and they were more passive than others in shaping their career aspirations. For the most part, the career decision-making process of these individuals was unstructured and often lacked any sort of clearly demarcated or intentional path to the professoriate. These 'accidental ECAs' commonly used terms such as 'random', 'by chance' or 'without a plan' to describe their entrance into the profession. In many cases it was the influence of significant relationships (mostly with senior professors, but also with friends and family) who served as resources not just in sparking their interest in academic work (as shown earlier), but also in creating unexpected opportunities that were previously not imagined by these ECAs.

Biljana described her entrance as 'unexpected', as she had no intention of entering academia when she left the university as a student, but a call from a professor shifted her aspirations:

> I remember when I graduated I turned to the Faculty building and said to myself 'I hope my eyes will never see you again'. I had a couple of plans in my head about what I could possibly do after graduation, but it never occurred to me that one day I would be working in academia. I did not plan for such a thing. It was unexpected. If someone had told me at that time that I would be working in academia I would have started laughing out loud. But then, the call from a professor came whose Assistant had left, so he was searching for a replacement. So I initially started working for a semester, and then another one, and another one…and now look at me, I am working for almost 9 years.

Bisera also described a critical incident that redirected her towards an academic career. During her studies she never imagined joining academia, and recalled ironically joking with his college friends that one day they would see her sitting behind the professor's desk. She described herself as an average student, and because of her averageness she thought that it was beyond her academic achievement levels to engage in academic work. She was working for two years in the business sector before, as she says, 'a series of accidents happened' that opened an opportunity for her to work in academia:

> One day I bumped into a friend from my uni days, now a close and dear colleague, who had started working in academia a few years earlier than me. After going through the standard small talk that we should have a coffee together soon, we left, heading our own ways. A couple of weeks later I met him again on the street and this time we agreed to have that coffee in his office. As we were having the coffee a professor randomly came in to ask him something, and after a couple of seconds he recognised me as his former student. He stayed for a bit, we chatted for a bit, and then he left. After, I think, two months, my friend called me to say that the professor had asked him if I would come for a brief chat in his office.

Filip, who also had worked in a non-academic setting prior to accepting an academic post, related an account of a realisation that actualised his preference for academic work. Although Filip was initially interested in academia and got an offer for a position during his studies, he decided to refuse it in the first instance as his view was that 'most academics are corrupt'. In this, he actively distanced himself from academia and instead started working for a big international corporation. Over time, his work in the non-academic setting did not satisfy him, which for him made it 'crystal clear' that a classic 9 to 5 job was not meant for him. Consequently, he reconsidered the offer to work in academia and took a position at the same public university where he had completed his studies. After a year he received an offer, from the Vice-Dean of another Faculty at the same university, to transfer and continue doing a related line of work. He eventually made a decision to leave his initial position and accept this

offer. His decision was made with a sense of agency and strategising that was not readily apparent with most of the other participants who accepted their employment offers without having a concrete alternative to balance their decision with:

> I was aware that at the Faculty of X they hadn't had a newly opened position for an Assistant in a very long time, so I'd have to wait a number of years to get one. At the Faculty of Y I was immediately offered one and that's why I went there. They were just faster than the Faculty of X and offered me a more stable position, it's not like I had a huge preference to work at the Faculty of Y.

3. The present: 'the waiting room' and aspirations for dependence

In this section I discuss the present state of ECAs' careers, particularly in light of the promotion system in place. I start by exploring recent changes in regulation in regards to promotions, and their implications for the career development of ECAs. I then explore the ways in which participants handled the promotion process and the strategies that they employed to get promoted. In addition to the formal requirements for promotion, I also articulate the array of different informal factors that participants believed also influenced the transition from one academic rank to another, including dependency upon senior rank-holders and political patronage.

Legislative hurdles and misinformation around promotion

As explained in detail in Chapter 4, there is a tendency towards excessive legal regulation and a high intensity of legislative change by the Government in the field of higher education. The proneness of the law to amendments has caused a number of problems for ECAs when it comes to promotion. Almost without exception, ECAs complained that it was difficult to keep pace with the changes and to understand which version of the law is the one to be followed.

Consequently, the promotion criteria were seen as a moving target, making it difficult to sketch a meaningful course of action.

A further nuance adding to the complexity of promotion lies in the division of regulatory tasks between the institutions and the legislators. While the national and legally-defined promotion criteria places the focus entirely on research, the institutional expectation is for ECAs to do well in teaching. An additional paradox is that only teaching is defined in the contract that ECAs sign with the institution, while research, which is a legal requirement for promotion, is not, and is left by and large to the discretion of the individual. In consequence, ECAs are often presented with contradictory messages about the importance of certain aspects in the promotion process. In the interviews, they described a tension between meeting these two different sets of requirements. Finding the appropriate balance between the two, as I explained in detail in Chapter 7, required ECAs to shift their focus quickly, and continually adapt and re-adapt, which was proving to be a challenging and demanding, yet unavoidable task requiring careful planning and scheduling.

In circumstances of shifting legislation and competing demands, many ECAs had difficulty in deciphering what is expected of them in order to get promoted. This meant that even 'insiders' often struggled to get the correct information. To ensure they are headed in the right direction, ECAs often sought advice from others (such as supervisors, colleagues, legal offices, and so on); but the responses varied depending on the source, often bringing more confusion than clarity. Some approached colleagues who had already been through the process; however, as many explained, replication is often problematic given that changes are made frequently, and what worked in the past may no longer be applicable. An additional problem is that 'information and misinformation are routinely circulated' as Tina explained.

In this context, ECAs were usually left on their own to read and pick up on the structural signals of the system, and make sense of them as 'autonomous reflexives' (Archer 2003: 210). Bourdieu (1998: 25) talks about this as developing a 'feel for the game', as an almost unconscious knowledge of both the implicit and formal rules which allow for career ascendancy.

Being in 'the waiting room' and ways of managing uncertainty

The pace of promotion for participants was rather slow and difficult, and took more time than what interviewees expected. Moving upward on the career ladder was seen as bound by several structural limitations – lack of newly approved positions, administrative delays, legislative changes, slow committees. The period between applying for promotion and obtaining one was quite long, and for some interviewees it extended up to several years. This has created a 'waiting room' of candidates expecting to be promoted to a higher academic rank but feeling trapped in a bottleneck. Several participants who perceived themselves as being stuck indefinitely seriously considered leaving academia (as evident later in Section 4).

As explained in many interviews, the decision on the order of promotion is either internally agreed upon with the candidates, with a known outcome in advance of the official call, or it becomes an issue of contestation and partly even a lottery. Several participants who have already progressed from an Assistant to a Docent position attributed their achievement of promotion to sheer perseverance, and with modesty admitted that one needs to 'hang in there' to get promoted. In this sense, the promotion path of participants can be described as a 'survival model' where only those who are committed enough to overcome the long period of waiting have a chance of promotion.

Usually, candidates who have waited the longest are given clear preference, while others are expected to wait for their turn to come. In these cases, the decision on who gets promoted is based on the order in the queue, rather than merit. So, if one candidate has worked for the institution for seven years and another candidate has worked for five years, the first candidate is more likely to be selected. This has led to an absence of real competition for promotion and has heavily diminished the opportunity of attracting outside candidates who have no previous links to the institution.

In the minds of ECAs, the logic was clear: favouring internal candidates for promotion was not seen as problematic, even though it ran counter to the strict logic of meritocracy. The waiting reinforced this kind of reasoning among ECAs. For instance, Tomas saw no 'unfairness' in getting promoted over someone outside his institution:

> While someone outside is, I imagine, focused on doing research, I have been the one doing the less glamorous work here that keeps this Faculty going. Not just teaching and research, but administration, requests from students, complaints, forms, all kinds of bureaucratic ramblings. And all this for what? For a s***ty salary just enough for bread and butter. With all this, I think the only unfair thing to do is to choose them [outsiders] over us [insiders]....I have committed myself to the institution for many years, and I expect the same in return.

Still, the prolonged waiting and the unpredictability of outcomes caused a great deal of uncertainty for ECAs. Almost all participants described having experienced situations of helplessness and stress stemming from worries connected to promotion. This often extended to a physical manifestation of stress, including insomnia, chest pain, trembling and migraines. Naturally, the uncertainty intensified the longer the promotion process lasted.

It is worth noting, however, that the amount of uncertainty generated by promotion tended to vary according to the position held by ECAs, and was more evident among Assistants. For those that had recently got promoted to a Docent position, the very act of securing such a contract reduced uncertainty and served as a strong affirmation of their professional potency. However, many were afraid that this security is likely to be of a transient nature, and may disappear as they approach the next promotion hurdle. In this respect, they were aware that insecurity is not necessarily lost with their new positions.

In every case, uncertainty was seen as being built into the promotion process itself, not only because of the long periods of waiting, but also because of the ambiguity around the criteria for deciding the winner and doubt over whether they will be applied impartially. Given the fact that ECAs were well aware of these uncertainties, they naturally made efforts to reduce them, some more successfully than others.

In what follows, I describe Ana's and Aleksandar's contrasting ways of handling the situation of being in the 'waiting room'. During her interview, Ana repeatedly expressed discontent and self-reproach, often blaming herself for the decision to choose a career she saw as highly precarious. As she explained: 'I often ask myself whether the part of me that decided to focus on this kind of work really made a wrong choice?'. During the six months that she had been waiting to get the results of her promotion application, the question 'Will I get promoted?' became 'a daily obsession'. Even though she was aware that these recurring thoughts are self-sabotaging, she struggled to maintain a positive spirit:

> Even on my days off I have trouble enjoying myself, because my mind is constantly thinking about the promotion decision. It overwhelms me. It happens basically everywhere, in a club, in a cinema, at a birthday party, you name it, and I can't really help it. It's not even that something has to remind

> me of work for it to happen. It just comes suddenly. Sometimes it goes away after a few minutes and sometimes it stays for hours. I can't control that. It becomes impossible not to think of it.

In her effort to take some control over the situation, she focused on 'staying out of trouble' and tried to minimise uncertainty by 'avoiding disputes with colleagues and doing something out of the ordinary'. She felt that taking a critical position before her promotion can do her 'a lot of damage' and might turn out to be 'costly'. This more 'passive expression of agency' (Archer 2003: 201) was fairly common during the period of waiting, as participants tried to reduce issues that might lead to a negative promotion outcome.

Aleksandar was in a similar, if not worse, situation to Ana. He had been awaiting the decision concerning his promotion for almost two years. For him, this was an early warning that promotion is becoming unlikely and that his hopes of progressing were slowly sinking. He believed that 'it is normal to be anxious, upset, frustrated and even to harbour self-doubt, but that does not mean I should stop caring about myself'. He perceived himself as having little impact on the outcome of his application for promotion, so he tried to redirect his energy from thinking about promotion - because 'paying too much attention to promotion can do more harm than good' - to things like writing and reading, which he found personally satisfying and compatible with his perception of success:

> I refuse to look at my progress as an academic only through the prism of hierarchically climbing the ladder, because if I just stick to a titular recognition of my work it will only increase my frustration and it could lead me to self-destruction. I focus on what it means for me to be successful. The key word here is 'for me'. I focus on writing what really matters to me. I am more inspired to write a good article or to read a book than to focus my attention to something that I have very little influence over. This goal is within my reach and is personally more attractive.

Other participants took a more active approach, focusing on the possible benefits offered by the 'system' that either replaces or complements the formal rules. As explained in the following subsections, this was done through the influence of political patronage and by connecting with senior professors who often proved to have a decisive influence over promotion. In the following subsections I analyse each of these aspects separately.

Political patronage and 'telephone justice'

A significant number of the interviewed ECAs felt that obtaining a promotion is often influenced by political considerations. This was considered to be an 'open secret' (Tamara) that 'everyone knows about' (Tomas), but which few are usually prepared to discuss in an open setting. The impression that promotion is often much more political than merit-based was prominent particularly among ECAs at the two public universities. Many of them believed that securing a promotion is often tied to party membership (*partiska kniska)*, and it is generally considered that a party member would have a competitive advantage in comparison to a non-member.

Explanations for this view were often connected to the regulatory framework that provides the Ministry of Finance an exclusive authority over the approval and funding of new positions and promotions within public universities. Respondents suspected that in conditions of tight control from the political establishment over 'who gets in' (Irena), preference is often given to so-called *partiski vojnici* (literally, 'party soldiers', a phrase widely used to denote committed party members or party loyalists) or *svoi lugje* (people within the circle, as opposed to outsiders).

As several ECAs explained, the preference for a certain candidate was often evident even in job advertisements, which are drafted to correspond to the qualifications of an already-chosen candidate. Tamara believed that 'there is almost no post being advertised without the association of a preferred candidate', a situation which leaves very few neutral venues where another candidate can enter a competition on equal terms.

In the testimonies of ECAs working in the two public universities, there was no shortage of examples illustrating their conviction that by pulling political strings (*partiski vrski*) one can achieve promotion:

> As much as we don't like to admit it, there is a political element when it comes to obtaining a position. (Oliver)

> Those that are in a closer relationship with the ruling party have an easier way up…in securing the famous consent form from the Ministry. (Julijan)

> What else is there to talk about when party membership counts more than knowledge? (Maria)

> …I think I would have got it [a promotion] long ago if I had someone to make a phone call for me at the Ministry. (Tamara)

The last example illustrates the workings of the so-called 'telephone justice' (*telefonsko pravo*), a phrase which Ledeneva (2013) in the Russian context uses to describe 'the above the law' status that is enjoyed by those in power (or those with powerful connections), who are able to pick up the phone and resolve almost any issue. Extracts from the story of Tamara show how widespread the 'telephone justice' culture is nowadays in North Macedonia, sometimes to the extent of being encouraged by university officials:

> Politics have entered every single cell of the society…What can I say when the Faculty management gives you their best 'advice', like 'Why don't you try and find an aunt, a cousin or another connection [*vrska*] that could push things in

> the Ministry of Finance…' The Dean promised me that if I convince someone in the Ministry to grant me the finances for a Docent spot he will sign my promotion papers right away…One of my colleagues who has good relations with the present Government told me they required up 10,000 euros so that the information gets to the top of the Ministry.

While the extent of 'telephone justice' is impossible to precisely measure due its closed nature, the example provided above (as well as those presented below) illuminates a great deal about the strong foothold of informal ways of dealing with things in Macedonian society. Political patronage and other clientelist relations have penetrated, to a greater or lesser extent, into all significant institutions in the country, from the judiciary and education to public administration and the media. The factors that contribute to their development and persistence are, at least in part, also historically rooted. The scholarly literature on political patronage across Central Eastern Europe suggests a considerable continuity between the years of communism and the post-communist period, implying that the problems associated with it are rather systematic and are strongly embedded in society's culture (Hening and Makovicky 2017).

This position inevitably invites exploring the moral cosmology of ECAs concerning political patronage. Among interviewees there was a commonly-accepted understanding of political patronage as an immoral and dishonest act, detrimental to a community in which merit should be on the pedestal. At the same time, it was acknowledged with regret that these 'under the table' practices are also evident in the broader social landscape, and that higher education has not been able to remain intact.

In their critique of political patronage, many ECAs explicitly distanced themselves from having any involvement in such activity. For them, the moral cost of such action was too high regardless of the possible benefits that it may bring. Personal consciousness of guilt and the

fear of scrutiny (from colleagues and the public) were some of the most frequently stated reasons for avoidance. For instance, Jovan was not prepared to live with the consequences of such action, as it would require 'closing my eyes to injustice'. Similarly, Ognen insisted that he will never use political connections to get promoted as it goes against his personal and professional integrity. For Tamara, it was the shame that she would feel among colleagues ('I wouldn't be able to look them in the eyes').

But, in my last example here, I want to discuss a situation in which the very notion of political patronage as a deviant act was brought into question. Konrad was the only participant who admitted to his personal involvement in political patronage, and provided an alternative view of the problem and re-animated the practice as a matter of necessity, rather than a blanket form of corruption. In comparison to others, he did not invoke political patronage simply as an act for obtaining personal gain. On the contrary, for him it was first and foremost a calculative strategy that pertained to dealing with the paradoxes and challenges of the system and carved a space for personal action that he otherwise saw as closed. In this respect, his understanding moved away from a strictly normative view that singles out political patronage primarily as an illegal and illicit practice.

After spending almost two years hoping getting promoted from an Assistant to a Docent position, Konrad eventually decided to intervene and take things into his own hands, as he was 'fed up with the waiting' (*smacheno mi bese od chekanje*). He decided to try to secure his promotion through the then-ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE. His explanation for his decision encapsulates a popular perception within society that 'it is only through political parties that things really get done'. He described his action as a 'last resort' for fixing the injustice that he

believed had been done to him over his years of hard work. In this context, he interpreted his action as an effort to reward merit over mediocracy:

> When you see that there is no formal and civilised way out of the situation, you start figuring out ways that go around it. This is unfortunate, but it's the truth...My other option was to sit down with my legs crossed in the hope that one day a 'blue sky' will appear out of nowhere…I was fed up with the waiting. For a long time I had hoped that the State would somehow miraculously 'sober up' and become more sensible to rewarding people who are deserving, instead of supporting mediocrities. You hope that hard work can fix any injustice, but that's just not the way things are here…It is my career that is at stake. I don't want to be like the Colonel from Marquez's book who won battles against fearsome enemies, but lost his battle with the administration.

Yet, political patronage was not a morally clear-cut matter for Konrad. Even though he was aware that political patronage was ultimately a wrongdoing, he believed his action was justifiable in light of the circumstances. In other words, he saw himself as being caught up in a dilemma that must be resolved, unfortunately, at the cost of violating the law. To validate his action he appeared to employ what Sukes and Matza (1957) have termed 'techniques of neutralisation', which people use to temporarily suspend certain internalised norms or to pacify internal conflicts, without necessarily rejecting the norms themselves:

> I think it would be immoral if I asked to get promoted at the expense of another deserving colleague. But it's not like I'm taking someone's spot by doing this. There are no available spots [positions for promotion] to begin with. What I'm trying to do is to create one for myself…I'm quite sure others have also tried this route, and I know a few, but they are just not open about it…In my case, I think the only paradox in all of this is that I'm not supportive of the ruling party or anything that they are doing. I'm not even a member of the party...I don't see what I am doing as the cause of the problem, rather as resulting from it. If the State adhered to practices that foster integrity I would not have been in this kind of situation, right?

Although the literature on illicit behaviour would often, and I believe quite rightly, treat Konrad's behaviour as unethical, to label such agentive practice as simply 'corrupt' is to miss the point about the nature of things in North Macedonia. It is of course possible that such an

appearance may disguise moral deficiency, but it highlights another critical feature of ECAs' lives – that of dealing with structural constraints in practice, provoked by what is perceived as unfair treatment. Seen from this slightly different angle, Konrad's act of political patronage opens up a completely different sense of the reasons why an ECA may choose to engage in such a 'mode of action' (Ferguson 2015). It thus becomes a rather particular form of immoral conduct which implies active use of constraints and active exploitation of the weaknesses of the system to one's own advantage. From this more nuanced perspective, the use of such informal practices could be taken as an indicator of the presence of structural constraints and an agentive strategy in response to them.

The power of the 'bulldozer professors' and mentorship wars

The relationships that ECAs were able to create and maintain with their supervisors were often functions of what they saw in regards to promotion. For those with supportive supervisors (i.e. mentors) the challenges of the promotion process were often approached in dialogue. Several interviewees spoke of seeking advice or confirmation from their supervisors before undertaking a particular action, which bears close resemblance to Archer's (2003: 167) 'communicative reflexivity'.[14] Ljubica, for instance, turned frequently to her supervisor because she felt that her own thinking might lead 'to wrong action' – and relied almost entirely on what her mentor would do in a similar situation.

14 According to Archer (2003), individuals who employ this type of reflexivity rely on others' voices to complete the decision-making process because their own autonomous reflexivity is seen as insufficient. The suggestion she also makes is that communicative reflexivity is perhaps the most socially dependent mode.

Some participants appeared to be not only overly dependent on the advice of their supervisor, but also overly confident in achieving the promotion because of the positioning of their supervisors within the institution. Oliver is one example for whom a supervisor provided the recognition on which his self-estimation depended:

> My supervisor is very experienced and a very authoritative figure in my faculty. He has long years of experience behind him. I expect that under his auspices I will produce a doctorate of high quality that will open up an employment opportunity for me as a Docent within my Department. I say this openly and with confidence because I am convinced in his ability to do so. Under his belt he has three colleagues who were in the same position as me, and two are now Associate Professors and one is now a Docent. That, for me, points to the fact that he is a person who knows what he is doing.

While Oliver's hubris may seem overly excessive, it is not entirely unfounded and reflects a wider perception that was evident among ECAs, one where more established, and institutionally well positioned, academics can serve as powerful advocates for securing promotion. In fact, participants commonly believed that senior professors have significant power in negotiating promotion by making informal arrangements with other professors with the right to vote. These arrangements often remain implicit as they are done 'backstage', yet in practical terms they clearly further reduce the influence of merit alone, since they favour those ECAs with what Borkica called 'bulldozer professors' – powerful or popular supervisors who can clear the path for their preferred candidate, and 'can make things happen'. This confirms Altbach et al.'s (2015, p. 2) view that 'in systems with significant levels of inbreeding, informal ties start to play an important role in recruitment and promotion decisions'.

Based on what participants described, the influence of seniors is so strong that the promotion process often produces 'mentorship wars' (Slobodanka) that run through an 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva 1998) in which standards of reciprocity often apply – a situation which is

hardly controlled by ECAs and hence leaves very little space for individuals to protect themselves from such conflicts. When such wars happened, participants often had to guess how far their mentor (i.e. supervisor) was willing to risk compromising relationships with other senior colleagues in support of their candidacy, and this obviously produced additional uncertainty. Quite remarkably, ECAs often seemed more focused on the outcome of the war between mentors, than worrying about the few candidates that they were competing directly against – which again makes it very clear that the promotion process is not seen as strictly merit-based.

The point is perhaps put most clearly by one interviewee (Denis): 'it's not only about knowing who my enemies are, but also those of my senior professor'.

In this context, knowing the importance of patronage, ECAs often expend more effort on building and nurturing relationships with their supervisor and other seniors than on focusing on satisfying the formal promotion criteria. It was common to hear during interviews how candidates were approaching seniors to let them know that they are going to apply for promotion, or asking for their support prior to the voting and often as the decision for promotion was being made.

The experience of Tomas

The experience of Tomas concerning his promotion is particularly interesting, as it seems to capture well the complexity of the power relations among senior professors and their influence on the promotion process. He has been working for almost seven years without ever being officially appointed as an Assistant (as the State has not granted new openings). Working in a 'shadow' position has quite understandably left him with the feeling that his career is 'neither in the sky nor on the earth' (*ni na nebo ni na zemja*). When I asked him to explain his particular

situation that has led to this, he quickly reminded me that many others at his Faculty share his 'destiny'.

While his promotion-related struggles were evident since his first days, what is important for the argument made here is the period since 2014. That year, after years of jumping from one unofficial role to another (while actually doing the work of an Assistant), he finally saw a way out: 'I received inside information from my mentor that the Ministry of Finance was going to grant several new Assistant openings at our Faculty'. He believed that the new openings came much as a result of the constant pressure and lobbying to 'higher places' by several professors, including his supervisor.

He competed for one of the three spots with a dozen of other candidates in a similar position. The final decision of who would be selected was in the hands of the Faculty board and was made only after two months of debate – which for Tomas signified that there were most likely internal disagreements between professors. At the end, his name appeared on the list of three that were granted an Assistant position, and Tomas had many reasons to believe that he deserved to be among the chosen candidates. He, however, did not hide that there were others who, in his opinion, should have made the list, but did not because of *na ti go - daj mi go* (a term used by people in North Macedonia to imply under the table dealings which involve reciprocity, usually of favours):

> I must be honest here and say that there were better candidates than one of these three colleagues who were selected, but I suppose in the interest of internal agreements between professors and *na ti go – daj mi go* she got through.

'The story is not over yet', Tomas reminded me. His situation got complicated when the Faculty management found out that he was not in fulfilment of one of the administrative requirements

for promotion. Tomas was quite certain that a senior member of the faculty, to whom he had told this information in confidence in order to seek advice on how to resolve it, leaked the information. He believed that even a TV series such as *House of Cards* would pale in comparison with this 'perfidious situation', which made him learn the hard way that 'I can only trust a few of my colleagues'.

Eventually, Tomas managed to remove the administrative obstacle to his promotion, however, informally he continued to face challenges. He talked about a later situation where his supervisor was accused by other colleagues of lying, 'that it was not true that the obstacle was removed". To help bring his side of the story to the surface, Tomas explained how his supervisor took him 'by the hand' and 'walked' him to each person in the Faculty's Board.

On the day when the Faculty Board was supposed to announce the positive decision for all three candidates (including Tomas), the story took another unexpected turn as an inspector arrived at the Faculty. S/he allegedly acted upon an anonymous report of a student, although Tomas was convinced that it was a call by a professor who was on bad terms with his supervisor. Later in the interview, he said that this was not the first time for professors to send each other inspection controls, and he believed that it was not him but rather his supervisor that was the primary target – which again shows that mentorship wars can and do happen. Although the story has a seemingly happy ending because the inspection did not find any irregularities, the entire experience has had very negative implications for Tomas and it left him with 'a feeling of being a criminal because of all the accusations and contentions that overshadowed my entire promotion procedure'.

The nature of Tomas' testimony demonstrates a relation of hierarchical dependence upon his supervisor for achieving promotion. His choice of words alone ('she [his mentor] took me by the hand and walked me around from person to person on the Board') reveals much about this relationship. His mentorship, fits the profile of what Borkica earlier referred to as the 'bulldozer' type of professor that uses his/her institutional power to provide tractive force for ECAs' career advancement, often while pushing through very rough terrain. As was evident from the examples provided by other ECAs, these bulldozer professors did not rely strictly on their positioning as a source of career assistance. Rather, they often extended their contribution by sharing 'the tricks of the trade' (e.g., when to apply for promotion, or how to approach/choose the committee), providing insider information and helping ECAs to strategise their way through the promotion procedure.

Tomas' experience enables us to see another possible outcome. His example shows that while having the support of a supervisor can be highly desirable, one can very quickly find oneself walking on thin ice. What is specific about his case is that the danger did not emerge as a direct consequence of a breach in the primary relationship between him and his supervisor (i.e., animosity against one another), but rather as a result of a 'cross-fire' between his supervisor and another professor (i.e., a mentorship war) – an event outside Tomas' control. In other words, the risk created was not self-inflicted by his own actions, but was the result of 'an involuntary social placement' (Archer 2003: 183) in a situation of conflict between other people and about something else.

Lone deliberation, external validation, and the concept of dependency

For many ECAs who lacked mentorship support and who reported a complete absence of their supervisor, making sense of the promotion process required 'lone deliberation' (Archer 2003:

191) and a great deal of ‘self-learning’ (Archer 2003: 191). In other words, these interviewees had tried to figure out the process intrapersonally and ‘autonomously’ (Archer 2003: 193). Intensified feelings of worry, stress and disorientation were evident for those who relied primarily on ‘the lone self’ (Archer 2003: 168).

The grim consequences of the absence of mentorship are perhaps most vividly illustrated by the following example. Zorana, in many ways similar to other the participants, had an obvious problem in explaining everything connected to the promotion process to herself, let alone to another person (in this case myself as an investigator). She struggled to formulate an understanding of the criteria, not because she was unable to identify them, but because she did not know what to make of them. As with others, she was sceptical about finding a resolution to her dilemmas entirely on her own. Her fear was that without external consultation and support, she would not be able to factor in all the necessary considerations. Following all the changes in legislation (something which she did regularly) was not enough in her view. She believed that taking advice from ‘hot sources’ that supervisors have access to is equally important, a view evident among many other participants who also preferred to get information from sources that they felt could be trusted, rather than official materials. Because Zorana regarded the availability of a supervisor as constituting having a trustworthy source, one of the consequences of having an absentee supervisor was to regard her own thinking with suspicion, if not negatively:

> I am doubtful of everything I know. I doubt if I have got all the information right, if I have enough points, if I have done anything wrong, if I have done this and that and many other ifs and fears that are circling around my head. What I have no doubt about is that if I had had a supervisor to take care of me I would feel more secure.

Zorana's example shows that the reliance on the self was resulting from her feeling of isolation, rather than from the lack of an ability to see the importance of staying connected and receiving advice from others. In her case, the same isolation also appears to explain her 'imposter syndrome'. She struggled, as many others did, to internalise her accomplishment and had a persistent fear of being exposed as a 'fraud' despite having published in several high-end international journals and being voted as the best Docent by students for two consecutive years. Even episodes of positivity were usually followed by a persisting feeling that 'others will soon find out that I'm not good enough'.

This need to feel validated by others in order to be able to validate oneself stood out as dominant in the narratives of many participants. Their stories provided evidence that internal validation was highly influenced by the external recognition from a supervisor and their active support. For some, this external recognition was simply having someone to talk to, or someone to reassure them that they are on the right track, which highlights the social needs of ECAs. For others, the presence of a supervisor meant a greater role than just being occasionally 'looked after', which was grounded in a conviction that supervisors can use their position to open a way forward for career advancement.

In this context, particularly bearing in mind the widespread insecurity and hardship faced by ECAs, dependence upon a supervisor during the promotion process becomes an existential issue. For most interviewees, the aspiration for dependence was greater than the fear of losing individual autonomy. This subordination in exchange for support was highly desirable amongst participants, as it often came to signify 'a ray of hope', to use the words of Ruza. Even for those ECAs with problematic supervisors the goal was not to end the dependency, but to replace it or to find a way of constructing another form of it. In this context, ECAs sought to

build up new dependencies, meaning that it is not the dependence but rather its absence that was most frightening to them.

The driving forces that give rise to this aspiration for dependence among ECAs in the Macedonian context are, as some would argue, partly social in origin, and came about historically. The cultural colouring of this phenomenon is perhaps put most clearly by Humprey (2017: 31) in her article on favours in the post-socialist higher education, where she argues that people in the former Eastern-bloc countries are unaccustomed to employing lone inspection in order to determine courses of action:

> Unlike in Western Europe, where Protestant traditions encourage people to analyse their feelings and trials by lone inspection, or at best with the help of a moral guide/therapist, in Russia, both the Orthodox tradition and Soviet practice assumed collectives as the site within which each person should strive for sanctity.

However, one could argue that Humprey's position is overly deterministic, and holds an inherent danger of imprinting the idea that this *modus vivendi* is an inescapable part of the cultural fabric of people in the former Eastern-bloc region.

4. The future: narratives of leaving, staying and ambivalence

ECAs reported three avenues as regards their futures: leaving academia, staying in academia, or being stranded between leaving and staying.

4.1. Narratives of leaving

Three distinct, but not mutually exclusive contexts appeared to drive the motives of individuals in this group: the external, the institutional, and the personal contexts. In what follows I explore the range of exit options that ECAs put forth as possible and desirable within these contexts.

The external context

> I can name hundreds of things that bother me in my institution and I could speak about this all day. But, that's not why I am leaving. It is the societal atmosphere that kills me. (Denis)

Potential leavers like Denis, even though faced with numerous obstacles in the workplace, most often cited conditions beyond the institutional environment as reasons for leaving – ones that have to do with the broader societal, political and economic context. More or less all individuals that looked unfavourably upon these contexts expressed a willingness to move abroad, rather than opting for another job at home. Countries across Western Europe and North America were the most attractive destinations imagined. While some spoke of their departure intentions only in broad terms, as a way of finding greener pastures and assuring a better life for themselves and their families, others had also considered the specific moves required to reach their intended goals. Examples of both are provided below.

Biljana had been thinking of ending her contract for almost a year even though she had recently got promoted to a Docent. Finances were very influential in her potential decision to leave, as she is the mother of two children and wants to make sure that they 'have the same things as other kids'. However, what has made her reach a 'breaking point' is not finances, but rather the deterioration of the situation in society, which often makes her think of 'packing all of my suitcases and forgetting about North Macedonia, even if that means becoming a waitress somewhere else'.

Ljubica who works as an Assistant at a private university constantly dreams of moving abroad because she feels that North Macedonia, in its present turbulent situation, cannot satisfy her personal needs and expectations. 'If it's a good position offered I'm prepared to leave today',

she says. Her main professional goal is to move out of the country and join a developed and dynamic labour market, regardless of whether this is in industry or academia:

> The labour market here [in North Macedonia] lacks a developmental component that might open up opportunities. For an ambitious young person that has something to offer and is prepared to invest in his/her career, this market is a punishment. You get sick if you stay. A toxic environment. I openly say this. I have a fairly good life in North Macedonia in both the professional and the personal sense, but I want more. I work on making this happen at the moment, and nothing will or can stop me. I haven't formed a family so I can afford to do this.

Bisera, a Docent at a public university, is also considering the option of leaving for another position either in North Macedonia or abroad. She wants to make a break and look for a job strictly outside of academia, because in her view 'pretty much all jobs in academia share similar characteristics. It doesn't matter if it is a private or public university'. She finds intellectual work to be vastly underestimated within society and the 'seeming commodity' that academia offers in its symbolic title are not enough to compensate for the stress of her work. The politics that have infiltrated higher education in the last decade are another issue that she cannot get over.

The institutional context: shattered dreams and broken promises during day-to-day work

Reasons for leaving associated with the day-to-day work environment and other aspects of the institutional context were also evident. Commonly, participants had formed a general sense of how they imagined things would be like in academia, only to later find out that meeting their expectations would be more difficult than they had thought – either due to their rosy and often unrealistic expectations, or because explicit promises made to them were broken. In this context, ECAs whose day-to-day expectations of academia were not met were more prepared to leave.

Glasna, like many other participants, noted that her expectations were to find an atmosphere of collaboration. She did not imagine that she would spend most of her days on her own, siloed and without having any chance to interact with many people. This individualised culture that she had perceived at her university was not a good match for her 'energetic character', and had contributed to feelings of isolation and disconnection from colleagues. The perceived treatment of being 'less than equal' compared to senior colleagues has been a further disappointment that has made her consider leaving. She often asks herself 'Do I want to spend my entire career in a place like this?', because of these reasons.

Tina noted a regret related to the kind of day-to-day work that she was expected to perform. She thought that her preference for research over teaching would be awarded instead of being suppressed in the private university where she works. Before joining the institution, she had made it clear that her preference is in research, and management reassured her that she would have plenty of opportunity for that. With this promise in mind she had accepted the offer. However, later she learned that research was not the norm, 'it all came down to teaching'. The fact that the promise made to her did not materialise was the key factor in her decision to leave her institution and academia altogether at the end of the academic year. In this respect, the way her day-to-day life had unfolded strongly shaped how she looked at her future career intentions.

Personal context

Participants also explained their departure intentions in light of their personal contexts. The 'personal context' meant different things to different people, but most often included dealing with important life tasks and responsibilities, such as considerations of starting a family, getting married, buying a home, and so on. With the present remuneration, most participants felt they

would need to find work outside of academia in order to be able to support and achieve these goals. They perceived academia as incompatible with family life. Acquiring a more stable employment and better pay were thus tightly connected factors that supported their intention of leaving.

Nikola decided to leave his Assistant position at the end of the spring semester. Just a year before he had not thought of leaving, even though he had often asked himself if 'all of this is worth it'. The recent birth of his child changed the way he was thinking about quitting. He started the search process by putting a word out to close friends and family that he was looking for a new job, although he initially kept this secret from colleagues. A couple of weeks later a firm offered him a mid-career position as a consultant. With the support of his wife and parents, he decided to take the job that he was certain will 'make things easier with the child', since the offer made by the firm seemed quite generous, 'almost four times my present salary'. When asked about the possibility of returning to academia, he remained open to such a step, but 'only under more dignified working conditions and adequate remuneration' – a view that resonated with many others who intend or have already decided to leave.

Iva had an atypical story connected to her personal context, and very different from that of Nikola. She wanted to leave because an academic career was just not to her liking any longer. She framed her decision to leave in light of what she had become over the years of her work in academia, which she believed threatened her self-conception:

> Before starting this whole thing I was a very active, positive and outgoing person, always up for things. I was actively engaged in society, I was going to protests, debates. Essentially, I liked who I was. Since entering academia this has slowly changed. My efforts to succeed in my academic career have changed who I am personally. I have stopped going places or doing things that I enjoy.

> My career has become my life…I don't like who I am when I'm in there and I don't like where it has led me.

Even though Iva appears to be determined to leave, she was quite abstract in naming alternatives, and did not go further than a witty 'I'm considering retreating into the mountains, chopping wood and reading books by the fire'. In this respect, it seems that her imagined future still lacked 'a serious exploration of real possibilities' (Archer 2003: 171).

For Ognen, leaving was not an easy decision to make because he was unsure how his parents would react to that, as he comes from a family of academics. Moreover, he feared that his new job might turn out worse or boring, which might be even harder to bear than the insecurity of his present position.

As one might expect, this 'failure' label and the stigma around leaving often got in the way of ECAs' optimistic appraisal of their situation and led to serious doubts about their ability to successfully transition to another career path. They were often uncertain if what they have to offer is what employers outside academia are looking for in an employee. Even in the face of multiple obstacles connected to promotion, they sometimes talked about an academic future as being a more predictable and less risky orientation in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. Despite the intensity of the desire to leave, an obvious fear of the 'unknown' was present that still held them back from progressing from an intention to leave to actually leaving.

How often did ECAs think of leaving?

Almost all interviewees described having experienced at least one instance, at some point in their career journey, when they have thought of leaving. Some thought about leaving

intermittently, particularly around what they often termed as ‘difficult periods of the year’ (for example when their contract came to an end) or at ‘difficult moments’ (such as around exam periods). For instance, Teodora considered leaving during what she called ‘periods of high amplitude’ initiated and provoked by stressful day-to-day situations, mostly around his teaching workload.

Others said that the thought of leaving had crossed their minds quite regularly. They spoke of ‘daily’ and ‘weekly’ instances of thinking about it. In most cases, considerations of leaving were described as long-term experiences, regardless of their frequency (whether sporadic or continuous). For Ljubica, the thought of leaving was a long-term experience. When asked ‘How often do you think of leaving’, she responded with the following:

> So here is the thing: I don’t even think, I am determined to leave. I have been actively working on this over the past six months. I spend a minimum of two hours per day on this task. I have lived abroad and I know what awaits me. It’s not about the money, it’s about the fact that we as a society have gone backwards. And as communal entities, we can’t just isolate ourselves from our environment…

4.2. Narratives of staying

The analysis showed that participants with a longer career duration in academia were more likely to want to stay and seek ‘contextual continuity’ (Archer 2003: 168). Some perceived that they have passed the stage of thinking of a change or making one. For instance, Brane felt that, as a Docent, his career is already ‘too far in train’ for him to be competitive with those already working in the corporate world, and feared that it would be very difficult to adapt his knowledge to the needs of the market.

Interviewees also spoke about getting into a comfort zone or 'getting used to' what they already had as a reason for holding back from a career move. Being in a comfort zone meant different things to different people: for instance, for Borkica, this was 'knowing the challenges of the workplace', while for Slobodanka it was 'the familiarity of the place and the people that work here'. Despite expressing discontent with many aspects of their day-to-day work and careers, re-location appeared to be disruptive to ECAs' comfort.

This exposes an interesting contradiction between waiting as a source of frustration and as a comfort zone. In this respect, while almost all participants in this group spoke of confronting a multitude of career upsets, they were still willing to work towards maintaining the status quo rather than trying to change to what was, similar to those who do leave, often described as the 'unknown'.

Closely connected to this were references to the time and effort invested in establishing a pattern of work and a given lifestyle. Filip's account is a fine example of this. He has been working in academia for seven years and is currently holding a Docent position. His plan is to remain permanently within the institution regardless of the downsides that staying brings, particularly around the workload and the effort it takes to get promoted. In the past he has had opportunities to relocate abroad, but still decided to stay because, as he said, 'I know that my impact will be much larger here'. The tendency to stay because of an investment already made was evident in his account:

> I don't have an issue with finding a job. I can even find something that is less challenging and better paid. But then why did I invest so many years in this, why did I fight for so long? So I can just leave? I want to spend my life here. I want to die on my desk, that's my ambition. People laugh when I say that, but that's the fact. I like what I'm doing.

A somewhat similar account was also shared by Oliver. He recently got a job offer from one of the biggest international companies operating in North Macedonia. For a split second, this made him think of how it would be to work for such a multi-million Euro company, and even to his own surprise the projected image of himself working there looked quite promising. Despite the appeal of the offer, he declined. He justified his decision to stay in view of the time investment he had already made in his present career:

> My response was that I've been doing this for three years now, three years I have invested in myself and I think that there should be a closure to this. I followed my own ambition…I owe this to myself, I committed to an educational degree in a completely different field, and it's really a big sacrifice, particularly in light of the fact that it has been in an area very different from what I did in the past. I said f*** it, I'll stick to where I am...

For Oliver, there also seems to be an element of local pride and loyalty in being committed to one institution. The recruitment and appointment procedures that give a positive edge to local candidates over outsiders should, therefore not be ignored as a force that eventually reinforces this loyalty.

> Honestly, I wouldn't work at another university. So far, I have had two concrete offers, one from a private and one from a public university, but it's just not a challenge for me. It's like football, you want to play for Manchester United and when you've played there, other clubs are not a challenge for you. You don't go to play for Everton if you don't have to. Maybe in global terms my Manchester United competes in the third league, but as far as North Macedonia goes it is still the champion.

Participants who have trained and commenced their careers at the two public universities expressed some of the clearest intentions to remain permanently in academia. Interestingly, at the same time, these were some of the people that were faced with the most discouraging prospects of promotion. The perceived prestige also appeared to be important for these ECAs in making a decision to stay. Their mind-set was one lacking in willingness to move, even though it could be argued that these participants have the greatest opportunity to do so. In this

respect, in a voluntary and often anticipatory manner they actively curtailed their work aspirations and limited their own opportunities for advancement in the broader employment market, in order to preserve their career investment.

For others, the rationale for staying goes to the heart of what being an academic entails. Several participants described their decision to stay as stemming, at least in part, from the inherent joy they derive from various aspects of their work. For instance, Melita articulated her passion for teaching as a key reason that fuelled her desire to pursue an academic career. This 'rewarding feeling' is still strong and is the primary reason for her to stay. She thus intends and works to remain an academic for the same reason that she became an academic. Even though she acknowledged that due to the recent reforms academic freedom has suffered, the current levels of academic freedom still suit her and she hopes to continue doing her future work without much interference from 'big politics'.

Reasons for staying connected to the institutional work environment did not figure prominently in the narratives of ECAs. However, for two ECAs, Filip and Tomas, the impetus to remain in academia came as a result of the support and encouragement that they had from their senior supervisors. Tomas considered his Cathedra (i.e. Department) as 'a safe space', because for him the national and even the broader institutional context was always negative. He claims to have stayed for so long despite all hurdles for the sake of the professors that he works with ,'If it hadn't been for them, I would have been gone long ago', he says. Like Tomas, mentoring support also helped Filip to sustain motivation and to hold on to his current job and career. He spoke of having a favourable relationship with his supervisor and explained his decision to stay as something that he owes to himself and to his supervisor. His commitment to continue on his

existing path appears to be the result of a faithfulness and connectedness to one individual, rather than the broader micro environment as was the case for Tomas.

The decision to stay was more commonly, and often tightly, linked to the access to adequate support from significant other relationships outside the institution (usually a parent or a partner) with more stable and adequate remuneration. For Tomas, the financial support from his parents has been equally important as the emotional support from his Cathedra. His salary is below the national average and it is hardly sufficient to cover even his daily living expenses, forcing him to rely on the income of one of his parents. He mentions that in several instances even this minor salary has been months late, which has been an additional cause of frustration. On several occasions he has tried to do some extra work to increase his financial independence but the teaching obligations at his Faculty and the writing of his doctoral thesis have made this more difficult. A recent family misfortune with one of his parents has made him think about the consequences that this event might have had on his career:

> I had a family misfortune two years ago. My mom had cancer. Fortunately, everything ended well. Yet, this was an event that made me think deeper about 'what if something else had happened?' I told people at my Faculty that had this been fatal for my mother, I would have had to leave the Faculty because there would have been no one to support me financially anymore.

The unenviable financial situation has also forced him to postpone decisions in his personal context:

> I've been preparing to propose to my girlfriend for some time now. I keep postponing it because I keep feeling that the time is not right. I want to do it when I become financially stable. I mean the last thing I want to ask from my father now is to cover my wedding expenses on top of everything else.

Julijan has also been relying on the financial support of his father to be able to make ends meet and to continue pursuing his career. His father has covered the tuition fee (an equivalent of

£3000 for the entire duration of the PhD) of his ongoing doctoral studies and pays for half of his apartment rent and bills. He has been deeply appreciative of the sacrifices that his father has made in order to help him pursue his dream career, but at the same time the lack of financial autonomy has made him feel like a 'parasite':

> I am approaching my 30s and I am still dependent on my father. I can't pay a single electricity bill on my own. I feel like a parasite. I feel like that the institutions of the state don't have even the slightest idea how much all of us invest financially and emotionally, and they don't care if I have an empty fridge or not, or if I'm teaching with an empty stomach or not. Nobody should be worried about those kinds of things. The right of basic existence should be guaranteed to all.

His financial situation has also impacted on how he feels about his work:

> Each day I'm supposed to 'sell' high moral values to students, and yet I can't even secure my basic existential needs that would support those values. I feel like I am dishonest to students. Like I am cheating. Like I am selling a story that doesn't exist. I feel that I am selling something that I don't own. There is a hierarchy of needs, you first need to secure the physiological, then the material which will help you get a roof over your head, and only then you can start thinking of self-realisation in a worthwhile sense.

The stories told by Tomas and Julijan show that simply having a personal desire to stay is often not enough on its own. Having a source of financial support can be equally important. This raises an important question, as to what happens to those in less privileged positions and from poorer social backgrounds who are not necessarily in a position to rely on a similar kind of support and so extend their hopes of a successful academic career indefinitely.

The personal context: The difference between wanting to stay and having to stay

While some ECAs, as reported above, wanted to stay because of the enjoyment they felt from their work, for others staying was seen as the only option possible at the moment. In this

respect, an important distinction emerged between one 'wanting to stay' and one 'having to stay'. For those in the latter category the personal context emerged quite strongly as a reason for staying, and it was often the case that 'family and friends…[were] their ultimate concern…that greatly outdistanced other concerns' (Archer 2003: 169). The decision to stay for them often coincided with or came soon after starting a family and it involved consideration of the partner's career, children's education and other personal factors (for example geographical proximity). The two examples provided below are indicative of a shift in priority between professional and personal responsibilities, particularly evident for those ECAs with family obligations.

Ljupco had recently faced a dilemma over whether he should stay in his present line of work at home or move abroad. A year before he had received an offer for a postdoc position at an Ivy-League university in the US. After careful consideration he had decided to reject the offer despite the achievement of being selected for such a competitive position, due to a shift in his *'modus vivendi'* (Archer 2003) from the professional to the personal context:

> The conditions and the finance package that were offered to me did not correspond to someone with a family. There was no additional financial support provided for a spouse or children. My wife would have had to stay in North Macedonia because she would not be able to get a work visa. If I took the offer, this would have meant not having my spouse or my kids around most of the time. So my personal life was absolutely crucial in making my decision to reject the offer.

Zorana has also decided to remain due to family reasons. Last year she applied for a postdoc position at a Scandinavian university and received an offer for the duration of one year. Her recently new-born child was the primary reason why she decided to reject the offer:

> I wrote my Masters thesis with my first-born child, then I wrote my doctorate with the second one, and now when the third one has arrived I've decided for

> once to turn priorities around. It was not an easy decision because the terms offered by the university were great, but I don't regret my decision.

4.3. Ambivalent narratives: to stay or to go?

The third and final avenue present in the narratives of participants was one marked by a dilemma: whether to leave academia altogether, or to stay. This often meant having mixed feelings or contradicting ideas about what the future might hold. ECAs in this category imagined their future careers in the abstract more commonly than others, and were most ambivalent about their future career choices. The prolonged period of the early career stage and the lack of medium and long-term prospects had obvious consequences on their future career decisions, and placed them in a very difficult position around deciding whether staying or leaving is the more desirable and effective way forward.

Living with contradiction

The most common manifestation was one of repeatedly declared intentions to leave academia due to high levels of job insecurity, while simultaneously making efforts to remain in academia by fulfilling promotion requirements. Maja's thinking is one example which makes evident how these two logics operated at the same time. During the interview on several occasions she reassured me that her plan is to leave academia due to the alienation and distress that she was experiencing:

> I just want to leave. I feel alone here and I don't feel comfortable…I need to leave, I can't deal with the stress anymore, I'm sure I will be better off somewhere else…There is no point in staying.

Yet, at the same time, when asked to talk about her promotion, she appeared to be deeply agentive and committed to achieving the necessary requirements. She was currently working

on two research papers and preparing another one for a journal submission. She often talked to her senior colleagues about the requirements necessary for promotion, and had already tried to calculate the points she has collected so far, just to be sure that she is on the right track.

Given that her intentions of leaving did not necessarily coincide with her actions, particularly around promotion, I asked her to talk more about this seeming contradiction. Apart from having reasons to leave it also appears that there are a number of reasons for her to stay (such as the fear of missing out on enjoyable experiences in the classroom), but she has to remind herself of those reasons because her intuition is telling her to go the other way:

> I know, I constantly fluctuate between extremes. Every time I think I've decided to leave, I'll have a great class with my students, or just have a good day, and I'm thinking…maybe I should not leave. I am afraid that I might miss those kinds of precious moments if I leave.

Similarly to Maja, there appeared to be a contradiction in the stated plans for the future of Alma, but this time in the opposite direction. When asked about her plans for the future she repeatedly articulated her intention to remain permanently in academia because being an educator was always her childhood dream and she enjoys her work. Yet, later in the interview she goes on to say, 'I can't see myself anywhere in five years from now, and I am not an optimist', despite her being confident in being able to secure a promotion to a Docent position when the time comes. Finally, she talked about seriously considering 'the option of going into politics and starting a political career'.

'Giving it one more chance'

ECAs also told stories about 'giving it one more chance' (Zlatan) before making a final decision on whether to stay or leave. For Zlatan, whose sentiment was also expressed by others,

the definite decision was connected to his promotion for the title of an Associate Professor. If for any reason his promotion was postponed and he were to find himself in the same situation that he had experienced for his Docent promotion, his plan was to leave his institution and academia altogether. In this respect, 'it was circumstantial change which would make a difference, rather than any form of self-change' (Archer 2003: 169).

Jovan, similar to Zlatan, was also considering 'to hold on a bit more' before reaching a decision. However, unlike Zlatan, his decision was not connected to his prospects of getting promoted, even though he also had a firm deadline in mind before making 'a final move'. For Jovan, his next step was linked to the outcome of the next parliamentary elections. His hopes were pinned on the possibility of electing a new Government of the Social-Democrats, which would replace the one held by the Nationalist VMRO-DPMNE for almost a decade. He felt that there was no point in staying in the country if the status quo were maintained:

> It is a big 'if' whether life makes sense anymore in North Macedonia, and that has nothing to do with the university. I swear I will move if they [VMRO-DPMNE, Nationalist party] win again. I will go to the end of the world just to be as far as possible from them. I'm really sorry to say this because I've always been one of those proponents of steering clear of spite and have always wanted to stay here [in North Macedonia]. [That's] because if I leave, to some extent, I will feel defeated, like I have left something on a tray ready to be taken, something that they don't deserve and which is not theirs.

Considerations of current developments outside of the institutional environment were strongly evident in the narratives of participants concerning their future. In fact, the political, societal and economic environment were frequently cited as important contexts in which ECAs' career decision-making unfolded. This is in contrast to many studies in the global literature (e.g. Åkerlind 2005; L. Archer 2008b; O'Meara et al. 2016; van der Weijden et al. 2016; Brew et

al. 2017) where the sense of these contexts are either completely removed or only second to the institutional one.

In the narratives given by ECAs, there was another nuance that captured the oscillation between staying and leaving. Rather than thinking about staying or leaving, two ECAs also shared stories about leaving but not actually leaving, or as Aleksandar said, 'I am leaving emotionally, but physically staying'. He had considered leaving his university and academia several times over his career, and particularly now as he was struggling to get promoted to a Docent, but his view of the job market (like many who plan to stay) had discouraged him from the pursuit of such a future. He thinks that finding a new job can be difficult and that relocating can be demanding. His horizons of action had become even narrower due to the fact that his wife was unemployed. These circumstances have deterred him from taking any career-related risk in the near future, so he has decided to try and maintain his current job. So, rather than leaving he hopes to stay and re-engage with his work by doing just enough to keep his job. He has decided in favour of such a type of detachment in order to try to reduce being constantly sad and frustrated. He explains the price of caring in the following way:

> I can no longer afford to feel passionate about my job. It is just too costly in terms of my health and well-being. It's not worth it...Now I think of it [academic work] as like any other nine to five job out there.

Maria also talked about her experience of physically staying, while leaving emotionally. She explained that soon after trying out this strategy, she realised that it is 'entirely unsustainable':

> I think I was fooling myself when I thought I could make it this way, being completely indifferent about it. Instead of feeling better, I actually felt worse. This just did not work for me. I can't just do my job without any excitement.

When I asked her to further clarify why she could not do it, she continued: 'It's like asking an actor to play Hamlet without being emotionally involved. I mean you can technically do it, you know the text, you know your role. But would the result be good? I would say most likely not. The audience will notice this'. Her explanation indicates that for some ECAs the passionate involvement, or the intrinsic motivation, of doing academic work cannot be easily side-tracked or put on hold.

The future as uncertainty

Several participants were distinct in not clearly imagining any future moves, paths or goals. For instance, Ana struggled to predict her future because her previous experience with forecasting had proven wrong. The only thing she felt certain about was that 'there will be more instances of disruption, demotivation and even degradation'. She expressed disbelief in the pursuit of future career goals and rejected the idea of career planning:

> I have moved away from the whole idea of planning anything…It's too difficult to plan when things are changing constantly…I don't have any specific goals for the future. They form more along the way.

This type of career thinking, that the future is not predictable, at least not to an extent that is sufficiently useful to engage in purposeful career planning, appeared repeatedly in the interviews. Interestingly, such career-related thinking was most common for those interviewees that were too deeply absorbed in the present (for example: 'I'm only thinking about the promotion right now, I don't have sufficient time for that [future planning]', as Tamara explained). Being locked into the focus on the present, they narrowed their vision only to the immediately-pressing things and did not articulate their potential future opportunities at

great length. The lack of clear institutional strategies related to the recruitment, progression and retention of academic staff seem to be part of the problem that has led ECAs to think in the way described above. The often contradicting and confusing signals that institutions emit both foster hope and cause frustration for ECAs simultaneously.

In predicting their future, a final group of participants was unsure about what they wanted for themselves, not because they had difficulty in imagining any future or rejected the idea of forward career planning, but rather due to the fact that they were undecided about which career option should take preference. This stance is perhaps best captured by how Teodora recounted her plans for the future. For several years, apart from being an academic, Teodora had been doing additional work as a consultant providing advice to companies in her industry. She had engaged in this kind of work in part because she wanted to get more hands-on experience after finishing her PhD, but also partly because 'I did not know what I was doing'. She likes the consultancy work because it is well-paid, dynamic, involves teamwork and allows her to achieve more short-term goals in comparison to academia where she felt that 'it takes much longer to achieve something tangible'. Being interested in both academic work and consultancy, she stated that being in an explorative phase of her career allowed for keeping its footpaths open:

> It's on my thinking list to decide whether to stay in academia as a day job and then keep myself entertained with other things, or to quit academia and fully commit to consultancy. It is something that I think about all the time and I am not sure what it will take to make a final decision... I think in the next year or so I will need to make a decision about whether I commit to the academic path or try something else, and if I try something else whether I should do that in a way that will allow me the option to come back to academia.

Teodora perceived herself to be at a ‘crunch line decision point’, to make up her mind if she should stay or go:

> If I plan to take the academic route, the next year is perhaps the time when I will need to start thinking about the process, prepare and be ready for my Associate Professor application...What I realised over the years is that the longer you stay in academia, the more your skill set is seen more as being inflexible. From talking to people that work in consultancy I know that they often become quite suspicious of people with academic background because they think that you are likely to be a kind of arm-chair philosopher who is not ready to put in long hours of practical work...I disagree with such view, but I am aware that such a perception might be a barrier for a career outside academia.

Her indecisiveness seems to be in part a strategic choice: ‘I have tried to make my decision low risk and to avoid making a clear-cut decision over whether I am going for an academic or non-academic job...I’ve tried to keep as many doors open as possible’. This belief that making a career decision somehow limits opportunities and thus should be avoided or postponed indefinitely was also evident for several other ECAs, regardless of whether they planned to hold on to or let go of their present position.

5. Conclusions

The findings show that in the past, some ECAs had been active while others had been passive in terms of shaping their career aspirations. Some intentionally sought ways to get into academia, and some entered unexpectedly and under the influence of others. The commitment to the academic vocation among participants had usually developed during the course of their studies. The most compelling factors that contributed to this desire included the investigative pleasure of scholarly work, the perceived autonomy and flexibility, and the allure of the work environment. The invitation to apply for a post by a senior member of staff was by far the most common route of entrance. Internationally, this intriguing practice parallels the way in which

students are encouraged by supervisors to consider a PhD. However, elsewhere it is unusual and generally avoided regarding the appointment to academic positions.

In the present, ECAs are facing multiple structural barriers around promotion, from legislative hurdles and lack of promotion prospects to non-meritocratic practices and informal influences, all of which impact negatively on their careers and everyday lives. The path to promotion was often described as long, gruelling and stressful. The complexity of issues that influence the process of promotion has made the question of 'what matters to get promoted?' an extremely volatile one, and as a result, ECAs are often left with an uncomfortable ambivalence in directing their own actions or projecting future ones. The promotion system does not always adhere to strict meritocratic values, and sometimes depends on other factors (including dependency upon senior rank holders, and political influences). As a result, the official benchmarks required for promotion were often linked to what one knows (the information that a person holds on promotion), who one knows (the people that can influence the prospects of promotion), and how one is perceived (the ability to self-promote). In their effort to bring their careers forward and address these challenges, ECAs were exercising agency through building capacities to pick up on the structural signals of the environment and creating their own spaces of action in pursuit of meaningful lives and careers.

What the future holds for ECAs is far from clear. Aspirations for the future are rarely straightforward and usually involve moving back and forth, crossing personal thresholds and reaching turning points – being influenced by personal, institutional, and in most cases societal factors extending beyond the higher education landscape. The three different avenues reported by ECAs show that they have multiple and often contrasting dreams about the future. At some point in their career trajectory, a number of ECAs have expressed a readiness to leave

academia. The unclear and ever-changing advancement rules are some of the structural factors contributing to this process, further enhanced by the deep political crisis taking place in the country during this study. Some ECAs in this group articulated specific projects that might carry them away from their original context. In this they sought 'contextual discontinuity' (Archer 2003: 187) and have actively self-selected away from academia as a response to the structural challenges encountered. Such a reading has not been sustained through the existing literature on the interplay between structure and agency, in which leavers from academia are typically depicted as 'leaking from the pipeline while having little say in the matter' (Amery et al. 2015: 11), rather than, for instance, positively choosing an alternative career. This latter point give recognition to both their agency and to the structural environment.

Others, in turn, were seeking 'contextual continuity' (Archer 2003: 187) and were working towards staying in academia. While seeking contextual continuity 'sounds like a conveyor belt' (Archer 2003: 187), it was not deterministic or always the product of agentive passivity and lack of ambition. On the contrary, staying often required a considerable effort and active maintenance on ECAs' part, especially in light of the multiple structural barriers in place (e.g., the scarcity of and the long wait for promotion in the system). In this respect, seeking contextual continuity was just as much the product of agency as seeking discontinuity. In other words, both stayers and leavers were active agents, but the former were agents for stability and the latter agents for change. Interestingly, the structural impetus to remain or leave was often similar, indicating that the same structural influences can be seen differently by different people. This conclusion is at odds with many existing studies on academic careers where reasons for leaving and staying are presented as contrasting and one-dimensional avenues incapable of influencing career decision-making in both ways.

For a number of ECAs, it was evident that they were having mixed feelings and were stranded between leaving and staying. Narratives such as 'I'm leaving emotionally but physically staying' (Aleksandar) captured not only a career dilemma, but also an existential anxiety, where a psychological decision has been made but not put into practice. It was thus evident that some participants were balancing between their own ambitions and the personal circumstances that deterred them from taking any career-related risks. This third avenue also challenges the conventional dichotomy of career routes - you either stay or you leave - discussed in the existing literature on academic careers. Participants in this last group could readily be compared to the Archerian understanding of 'fractured reflexivity' which does not allow individual agents to effectively develop courses of action and to mediate the forces of structure. Individuals in this group had great difficulties in defining a stable '*modus vivendi'* (Accher 2003: 16) which is satisfying and sustainable over the long term. Moreover, they were having 'difficulties with the dovetailing of their concerns' (Archer 2003: 243) and struggling to find a satisfying and sustainable means of 'living it out' (Archer 2003: 259). Archer (2003) points out that fractured reflexivity is not necessarily a permanent condition, but it does, as in the case of many ECAs, emerge as a result of traumas or difficulties which lead individuals to lose the reflexive potentials which they had (most likely) previously developed.

Finally, as this chapter has demonstrated, relationships within and outside of academia are a major element of ECAs' career decision-making, playing out differently across various stages of their trajectory. In the past, some ECAs had decided to enter academia only after being approached by senior professors – an outcome very distant from their original career plans or intentions. In such cases, ECAs' first step and 'arrival' into academia was de facto influenced by others. Interest in joining academia was also, but far more subtly, sparked by academic role-models, childhood and family experiences, and upbringing. The major relevance of

relationships is also seen in the present, particularly evident in the promotion process as ECAs were often reaching out for advice and confirmation before undertaking a particular action, or had to create and maintain dependencies in order to progress in their career.

CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE DYNAMICS OF STRUCTURE-AGENCY INTERPLAY

1. Introduction

The aim of my thesis was to examine how the interplay between specific academic workplace structures and the agency of ECAs in North Macedonia unfolds on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories.

In the following subsections I discuss the key conclusions and contributions of my thesis. In Section 2, I start by reflecting on my initial theoretical position, the conceptual contributions my work has made and how theory has helped me to better understand the experiences of ECAs in North Macedonia from an empirical standpoint. Here, I provide an answer to the thesis' research question and examine how the experiences of Macedonian ECAs, on which I have reported, challenge current understandings of the structure-agency debate, and the way we think of academic careers in more peripheral countries. I also consider the impact that the work of Margaret Archer has made on my understanding of the structure-agency interplay and beyond that, the potential relevance that my development of her argument holds for future research in the field of higher education and academic careers. In Section 3, I reflect on the methodological choices I made and demonstrate how the qualitative approach has allowed me to provide rich and nuanced insights regarding the issues I have addressed in my work. Further, in this section I discuss how interviewing both ECAs and UAs has provided a unique way of exploring the political economy of higher education in North Macedonia, and what different interpretations of reality may tell us about the system as a whole. In Section 4, I propose several policy

recommendations. In Section 5, I suggest avenues for further research. Finally, in Section 6, I conclude with a note of personal testimony.

2. Findings and contribution

In Chapter 2 I presented the theoretical position of my research project. Here I discussed the conceptual use of the terms *structure* and *agency* in higher education literature, and I questioned the capacity of existing studies to deal with these concepts in a meaningful way. Specifically, I discussed the weaknesses of previous research in respect to the tendency to either over-emphasize the structural influences and neglect agency, or to overstress conceptions of individualisation and lose sight of the structural perspective. My thesis addresses this concern insofar as it contests the very contours of the structure-agency debate by arguing that a combined structure-agency approach bears more fruit in capturing empirically and explaining conceptually the experiences of ECAs.

In my conceptual framework I introduced three distinct yet interwoven constructs which offered a new means for capturing the structure-agency interplay: (1) the importance of the *context* in which this interplay happens; (2) the ways in which *relationships* shape the form of the interplay; and (3) the importance of *temporality* in influencing the dynamics of the interplay. These three constructs helped me not just to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of ECAs' positions, but served as a powerful and sophisticated tool to understand their experiences in analytical terms as well. In this respect, in an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, I used the interplay between structure and agency both as an initial conceptual framework and as a way to come to a better empirical understanding of the experiences of ECAs.

Context

In terms of the importance of the context, I initially argued that the interplay between structure and agency needs to be conceived and interpreted in close connection to the place of study. What my thesis has shown is that if we remain aware of the context, we can arrive at new understandings of the relationship between structure and agency. Situated in specific higher education institutions in North Macedonia, my findings suggest that the constraining and unstable nature of formal and informal structures that ECAs in North Macedonia face on a day-to-day basis and over their career trajectories encourages agency as a tool for survival, rather than leading to its reduction. Existing workplace structures - such as, formal policies and procedures, unwritten rules, hierarchies, nepotism, political patronage and cronyism - do not prevent ECAs from exercising agency, but instead require them to be even more agentic, agile and strategic if they wish to remain and succeed. In this respect, even though, due to structural arrangements, Macedonian ECAs may initially seem to have a constrained scope of action and limited possibilities for achieving agency in comparison with their non-peripheral counterparts, my findings point out that this is not necessarily the case as participants were not only able, but basically required to exercise agency.

As I showed in Chapter 7 and 8, it is perfectly possible for ECAs to feel constrained by the workplace structures in which they find themselves. Yet, at the same time they can undermine or take advantage of them by creating their own spaces and finding unexpected ways through barriers via rule-breaking, informal dealings, seeking dependencies, subtle and covert acts of emotional disengagement, resistance or even sabotage. In fact, even in cases when ECAs had negative experiences with the structures in place, it was, oddly enough, the very existence of such structural barriers that helped them discover and exercise agency. This recognition moves away from a one-sided emphasis on structural constraints, which covers only the negative

implications and neglects the possibility that frustrating experiences with structures can stimulate, and often necessitate, agentic thinking and action. My empirical work thus tackles and contradicts a common assumption upon which a significant part of the academic career literature rests, characterised by a tension between structure and agency - where structural forces automatically lead to less agency, and where structures are, almost without exception, seen as impeding or constraining individuals and their choices, rather than aiding, facilitating or necessitating the possibility of agency.

Further, what my findings tease out is the need for a more nuanced and context-bounded understanding of the concept of agency and what it means to be agentive in a particular peripheral structural environment such as the Macedonian one. While ECAs in North Macedonia and those in non-peripheral countries seem to share many of the same problems - lack of career prospects, unpredictability, overwork, burnout, distress – the way they respond to these challenges is quite different because of the distinct structural conditions (social, economic, national, institutional) in which they work. The experience of ECAs in North Macedonia makes clear that it is hard to be agentive in the same way as ECAs in non-peripheries, given the importance of illicitness and compliance with unwritten rules. In a structural landscape in which it seems nearly impossible to get by without breaking any rules, exercising agency by asking for favours, pulling strings, publishing in predatory journals and going beyond the legal becomes a necessary strategy for survival. These are forms of agency that develop gradually and discreetly, and which go beyond the visible spectrum, and so are not well recognised in the literature on academic careers. They do not quite make the mark as agentive – even if their ends are clearly agentive in terms of form and content. This immediately raises the question of whether the definition of agency should be expanded in order to capture what lies beneath the readily evident sense of the notion. The results of the thesis point to a decisive yes. As I have shown in Chapters 7 and 8, these offstage dealings and not-easily

perceptible practices help us to identify new, atypical and unforeseen methods of agentic expression, and ultimately to construct a more precise picture of the experiences of ECAs in a peripheral environment.

An important question that I raised was whether or not these unexpected pockets of agency can simply and straightforwardly be labelled as 'corrupt'? What I tried to say is that labelling someone or something as 'corrupt' might be misleading in a system where the formal rules have been skewered away from rewarding merit or have set standards that are almost impossible to achieve. In this respect, what may be seen as harming the system, in some situations, can have micro-level positive or at least non-negative effects. This means that the different readings of agency need to be placed in perspective, and more specifically in the context of the communities that make use of it, rather than judged according to traditional moral standards. Consequently, the ethical perspective around the topic of agency might also need to change in future research.

During the interviews with ECAs, a prevalent notion was that at a certain point the entire academic community, or a substantial part of it, allegedly engages in illicit practices. Individuals often justified their use of such practices according to the narrative that 'everybody does it' – mostly it seems out of necessity, and sometimes out of sheer pragmatism. In this context, participants tended to view these practices as a normal part of how things are done. This normalisation was closely tied to the deeply embedded attitude towards the formal structural apparatus as inefficient and illogical, and hence widely mistrusted. In an ideal situation, many ECAs hoped that doing things in line with the formal system would be better, and quite tellingly many did try to solve issues following the official rules. But in real terms, following failed attempts to solve issues using formal channels and procedures, 'fixing' things informally was considered necessary for staying 'in business'. In this context, ECAs tended to exploit illicitness as a last resort when they could simply find no alternatives - particularly in

the context of the promotion process, where requirements were too hard to understand and too high to comply with from a strictly formal perspective. From this point of view, existing structures inspired a kind of corrective agency which had the effect of filling the gaps in the system by compensating for existing shortcomings and insufficiencies.

In many cases the fact that these forms of agency were beneath the threshold of detectability made them even more reliable: that is to say, the less detectable they were, the more efficiently they were used. However, a more nuanced reading would reveal that they also caused multiple problems for ECAs. Unpredictability, confusion, discomfort and incorrect judgment were some of the concerns that surfaced in the narratives of the ECAs I interviewed. A significant challenge was that informal dealings were not easily understood by ECAs (particularly in the beginning), although they would often be recognised as integral parts of academic work. A related challenge was that they involved risk-taking and could not always be used in a controlled way – and hence they could not be held under check (for lack of being noticed). A daunting task for many was not only to learn what the implicit rules were, but also to know how and when to apply them. Lastly, what is essential is that similar to formal rules, non-compliance with informal rules or misreading them can bring credible sanctions – in the case of ECAs this included potential loss of employment, marginalisation, ostracism, injustice and other threats. This is the 'modernisation trap of informality', as Ledeneva (2017: 24) puts it: that one cannot use the potential of informality 'without triggering or escaping its negative long-term consequences'. In this respect, against the convention of only publishing positive and clear-cut examples of ECAs agentic activity, my study gives room for narratives of 'fallibility' and 'dubitability' (Archer 2003: 48) of agents, which I believe not only offers a more balanced view of ECAs' reality, but also attends better to some of the struggles that would otherwise remain invisible. In this respect, my suggestion for future research is that a robust model of 'the problem of

agency' (Archer 2003: 51) must also capture the negative results of agency in order to maintain a more critical and realistic stance.

In the same way as with agency, my study exposes a different, and essentially more rounded representation of structures. Structural issues in the realm of the informal - such as unwritten rules, patronage, hierarchies, nepotism, cronyism - that I observed in North Macedonia contrast with what we typically see as structural issues identified in the Western European and North American (i.e. non-peripheral) literature on academic life. Much to the loss of nuance, the existing, and mostly Anglophone, research work on ECAs and academics focuses on structures that are strictly explained in light of what Knight and Trowler (2001: 6) call 'front-stage aspects', which incorporate formal rules, policies and procedures – and are almost never juxtaposed with the 'back-stage' side of things where deals are done privately.

My thesis thus raises critical questions on the importance of also looking at structural issues that are not readily explicit, recognisable, or straightforward. What the Macedonian example shows is that in order to grasp the space of ECAs' agency one needs to not only focus on the formal, but also the hidden (i.e. informal) structures that are often implied rather than explicitly communicated. In fact, what my findings clearly show is that the 'informal' often becomes the key site of agential action in peripheries like North Macedonia.

On this front, my research joins anthropological and political science literature which has a long and rich tradition of studying hidden practices and informal exchanges alongside the structural domain. It builds on a chain of thinking in the social science literature and authors such as Ledeneva (2013), Ferguson (2015), and Scott (1998: 310) who claims that the 'formal order…is always and to some considerable degree tied to informal processes…without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain'.

What is thus required for further research is seeing how such informal structures resonate beyond the CEE/post-communist context (with which they are commonly associated) and the way in which they shape the agency of ECAs. The paucity of research on the impact of informal structures in higher education research, I believe, represents a missed opportunity for theoretical and analytical exchange in this respect. In this light, capturing informality is a key contribution of my thesis as a whole.

Relationships

The second element of my conceptual framework revolved around the impact that *relationships* have on ECAs and their careers and day-to-day lives. Within the institutional setting, the power relations between ECAs and senior academics was the big issue underlying the Macedonian academic context. Obviously, in many instances, having someone in power as a support was a good thing because it provided a level of protection and helped ECAs sustain motivation in difficult times, increased their self-confidence and ultimately helped them come closer to achieving their goals. In a seemingly contradictory phenomenon, ECAs were not seeking independence, but rather were searching for ways to build and reach greater dependency on seniors, particularly concerning promotion and the process of acquiring a PhD, given their potential influence on the outcome.

The focus on agency within the available literature is linked primarily with finding ways of reaching greater independence, while seeking dependency often figures as the opposite of experiencing as agentive (e.g. Martek et al. 2011; Yoshioka-Kobayashi and Shibayama 2020). My findings, however, offer a way of rethinking the relationship between structure and agency, given that dependency in this context operates as capacious notion of relational agency in the ECAs' career-long and day-to-day journey. In other words, dependence on others is not a passive condition, but can present itself as a 'mode of action' (Ferguson 2015: 145) to achieve

desired goals and in order 'to survive and to thrive' (Archer 2003: 191) professionally; and can be seen both as a weapon of the weak or the marginalised, and as an instrument used for jumping through hurdles, replacing and avoiding formal processes and structures.

In some instances, this dependency was manifested in seemingly mundane details (for example, to whom one can speak directly), but in other instances this authority translated into substantive control – for instance, over the topic of the doctoral thesis that one can choose, or when one should apply for promotion. What I have tried to particularly emphasise is the force of such relationships over career outcomes. In a number of cases it seemed that the relative institutional status, commitment and effort made by a 'bulldozer professor' could be decisive in someone being granted promotion, often to the extent that it challenged the meritocratic character of the promotion procedure and undermined the criteria determined by law. What is so telling about the metaphor of the bulldozer professor is that it signified the strength of informal connections and the fragility of formal structures in the system, and how barriers, among other things, increase dependency on others. What is also interesting is that the reliance on bulldozer professors went hand in hand with the credibility and functioning of formal structures. In situations where structures were coherent and worked more or less efficiently, the support of a 'bulldozer' was less needed. Conversely, when there were evident gaps in the functioning of the system, the role and impact of bulldozer professors was far more evident.

However, the problem with this kind of dependency is that it often led to the formation of a power dynamic between the mentor and the mentee that was very hierarchical. What the situation of dependence required was for ECAs to constantly be in a position to accommodate the needs and wishes of seniors and to follow their interpretation of reality, as well as to continuously re-examine and re-negotiate their mutual relationship. Dependency in this context can be a site of exploitation and relates to a notion of structural violence imposed on the

disadvantaged members of academia – those less privileged who are expected to appropriate the language of the powerful ones, while somehow making it resonate with their own lived reality. This is perhaps why some participants intentionally rejected engaging in relationships that might possibly lead to greater dependence. These individuals were to some degree more aware of the possible downsides that dependency can produce and hence more cautious in initiating such relationships.

Part of the reason why this type of dependency has become so normalised and so important in North Macedonia is historical. The power of seniors has survived almost intact since the late 1940s. Despite several waves of governance reforms to reduce the power of seniors and what they can control, the mode of governing embodied in strong self-governance has remained fairly untouched. In this respect, dependency can be seen as a product of a long-standing cultural logic of academic kingship, and part of an older institutional tradition which remains deeply anchored. A more general conclusion that can be drawn from this is that there are clear and direct links between how academics act now and how the communist history of the country has affected the structures that we see today.

For those ECAs lacking mentorship support, the process of navigating career trajectories and day-to-day activities was obviously more difficult as they had to figure things out more or less on their own, or seek support elsewhere. What emerged from my findings is that ECAs often compensated for the lack of institutional support by drawing on relationships in their personal lives, and situated their day-to-day and career decisions within their broader life experiences. Such a position, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. McAlpine and Amundsen 2016; McAlpine and Amundsen 2018), stands in contrast to much of the available research on ECAs, which concerns only aspects which relate to work responsibilities. In other words, the focus is on the

influence of roles such as teachers, researchers and administrations, rather than on roles such as parents, siblings, and friends.

Personal networks, especially parents, partners, friends and close relatives, constituted the most significant sources of support. The relevance of these networks was not just evident in emotional terms, but also in financial. Because of relatively poor remuneration and financial hardships, several ECAs relied on the income of either their partners or parents to be able to sustain their careers and imaginations. This was particularly evident for ECAs who faced a long wait before they could potentially secure a more stable position. One consequence of this is that the chance of building and maintaining an academic career is no longer a matter of an individual's skills and effort, but rather is closely tied with the social capital that one has in the personal sphere, and hence cannot be seen purely as an individual phenomenon. This dependence of ECAs on their family resources is highly problematic from the standpoint that it reproduces social inequality and creates a class structure in academia. If institutions and the system as a whole do not find more adequate ways to support ECAs in their career endeavours, what we will certainly see in the foreseeable future is Macedonian academia becoming an elite club of 'aristoscientists', as Tomusk (2003: 77) has put it, which eliminates those lacking the necessary social, financial and symbolic capital.

Networking in an international context was often difficult because individuals had few resources to attend conferences and to expose themselves to new ideas. This often led to intellectual struggles and made it hard for ECAs to pin down important questions in their field and how they might contribute. Not surprisingly, this sense of being disconnected from the academic world produced considerable frustrations and reduced ECAs' sense of expertise. Further, what was evident is that institutions did not seem to recognise the importance of staying internationally connected, and this clearly influenced the networking opportunities for ECAs. There was often a tension between meeting the objectives of everyday work and efforts to build

an international profile. In cases where participants were able to network internationally, these experiences were described very positively and served as a way to cultivate greater understandings about the workings of academia, but also to activate what ECAs were unable to see or understand before about their own local context.

Temporality

In regards to the third and final element of my conceptual framework, temporality, I initially argued that time has a central, yet often neglected, role in the way the experiences of academics are constructed. The different time perspectives that I have discussed in my thesis, career-long and day-to-day time – do not, of course, capture all variations of time experiences. But they do encapsulate the core dimensions of academic life and the idiosyncratic ways in which time shapes and alters ECAs' decision-making.

In connection to both career-long and day-to-day time, my analysis showed that the past, the present and the future are closely connected. ECAs were often reconstructing their past and imagined futures in view of the present, and in some cases were deploying one to make sense of the other. What was evident is that ECAs who had a strong orientation towards the present were those that were experiencing great difficulties and worked in the most challenging contexts. For these individuals, the challenges they were facing directly influenced their ability to look beyond the immediate and to shift their attention towards the future. Focusing on long-term planning or thinking about the future was almost impossible – which is reflective of the chronic situation many Macedonian ECAs are facing from a present standpoint. This signifies not only the importance of the past and the present for understanding the future, but also the importance of the future narratives for understanding what was happening in the past or is happening in the present.

At the same time, there were individuals who used their past experiences to develop coping strategies, helping them to sustain their motivation in dealing with present challenges and thinking about the future, but this was far from being linear or uninterrupted – a message we often receive from reading existing studies on ECAs. This meant that the ways in which ECAs acted upon certain situations were neither constant nor fixed, and what was perceived as desirable or possible often could change over time depending on what the structural landscape looked like and how it was also changing. What further challenges the simplistic application of the structure-agency interplay in ways which imply or assume linear trends is the fact there were contradictory responses by participants in certain situations. Sometimes ECAs felt that they are not 'in control', while at the same time feeling individually responsible for their predicament, attaching considerable importance to individual effort and expressing the belief that it is up to them to get out of their situation. In this context, what my findings show is that in a fast-changing policy environment marked by frequent disruptions and discontinuities, learning from past experiences can have its own limits and may not be as straightforward as we often think. This suggests that the degree of agency that an individual exercises may vary rather than grow linearly over time. This is in contrast to many existing studies where the trajectories of ECAs are too often constructed as a neatly unfolding pattern of continuation between the past, the present and the future, thus partially stripping them of their complex, contradictory and unexpected nature.

In respect to temporality, my findings inevitably raise a question about the relationship between career-long and day-to-day time and how they influence each other. In some instances, these two time perspectives were mutually supportive. For example, there were cases where positive experiences with career trajectory provided rhythm for the day-to-day work in which one was immersed. Similarly, those ECAs who were able to manage and organise their day-to-day time better and who worked on things that they found personally relevant, seemed to be more

satisfied with their career trajectory. However, in many respects, the interviews with ECAs exposed an overwhelming number of problems and tensions between these two time perspectives to an extent that day-to-day experience and career trajectory seemed to stand almost in opposition to each other. On the one hand, when ECAs talked about their day-to-day lives it was quite clear how much they were absorbed by the 'everyday', leaving less time to think in career-long terms. On the other hand, when ECAs perceived a lack of career prospects and a real threat of unemployment in the near future, it became harder for them to find deep attachment to their everyday work. In this context, the typical work situation was such that under the intense pressures of daily schedules and the insecurity brought about by career prospects, ECAs were struggling to gain a balance between the two. This situation is inconsistent with a large number of empirical studies in the field of academic work which either tend to present time as singular, or present a synchronic relationship between different temporal orientations.

Evidently, in both career-long and day-to-day terms, accounts of time pressures were a pervasive theme in the interviews with ECAs. Time was seen as a particularly scarce commodity, not just in its understanding as daily and weekly working hours, and time available for building an academic career, but as time available for personal 'reflexivity' (Archer 2003) or 'time to think' (Garforth and Cervinkova 2009: 195). Everyday commitments were characterised by a constant sense of 'lagging behind' or 'catching up', particularly thematised in the context of teaching and research commitments. The same is true about careers where experiences of 'waiting' were leading to feelings of uncertainty, worry, frustration and anxiety. This signifies that experiences of time have a profound impact on how ECAs feel and how they choose to act.

The challenging nature of managing time was most apparent in ECAs' complaints that the workload had become so harsh that it prevented them from having personal time (i.e., enjoying leisure time with friends and family). In this sense, both day-to-day experience and career trajectory can easily conflict with personal time. Part of what triggers this problem is that ECAs must devote time to their research outside of official working hours – since research is an invisible and almost entirely neglected component in the structural arrangement of institutions. Due to this, the key question for Macedonian ECAs seems to be how to create time for research. The answer includes making various trade-offs and different kinds of strategic arrangements, such as learning to say no, prioritising work and organising daily and weekly routines, avoiding administrative duties and devoting less time to prepare for teaching, or ultimately satisfying oneself with doing mediocre research work instead of demanding excellence.

Moving beyond an Archerian perspective on the structure-agency debate in the Macedonian context

This research has sought to take up, and build on, the critical realist work of Margaret Archer and benefited from the ways in which she thinks about the relationship of structure and agency. Her work helped me to situate my research more strongly from a conceptual, empirical and methodological standpoint, and brought more coherence in terms of what I meant about the positions of structure and agency and how these concepts should be explored. The main Archerian argument that I put forward in this thesis was that structure and agency are both equally important, and that only by looking at their interplay can one reach a more nuanced understanding of the lives of ECAs. In this respect, I followed one of her key propositions: that neither of the two concepts by themselves have much significance, and that they are relational concepts which only make sense together.

The usefulness of Archer's argument came into question in the empirical Chapters 7 and 8, mostly regarding the four modes of reflexivity (fractured, meta, communicative and autonomous) that she develops to study the interplay between structure and agency. For example, the ways in which ECAs thought about their careers and day-to-day lives was 'fractured' by different signals coming from the institutional and national level. There were also instances where ECAs' decision-making was 'communicative', for example, when they were seeking or relying on support from others, both from their professional and personal circle. Further, 'meta-reflexivity' was evident in the acts of resistance, subversion and refusal of the status quo. And 'autonomous reflexivity' often appeared in situations where ECAs had to figure things on their own. At the same time, these modes presented some of the greatest weaknesses in the context of my study, as almost none of the participants fell squarely into any of these categories, and a strict following of them would have entailed a loss of the nuance of the individual experience. The universal applicability that Archer grants to these four modes implies looking for homogeneity and labelling the experience of individuals – in my view, something to be avoided.

Further, Archer analytically separates structure and agency in order to examine their interplay: my findings, however, imply that these two cannot be separated when considered in practice, and not at the level of theoretical abstraction. So while her work is conceptually useful, it appears that her claims about 'analytical dualism' are rather difficult to demonstrate empirically, except rather superficially, and hence she does not convincingly argue and substantiate why they need to be looked at separately. My findings show that the interplay emerges most convincingly when these two concepts are discussed together, rather than when keeping the different dynamics in play conceptually separated.

Finally, Archer's work, when seen through the lens of my data, turns out to be a sociology of metropolitan, developed and open societies, rather than peripheral, developing and less democratic ones. Archer is silent on matters such as dependency, hierarchies, political pressures, as well as other less visible, and often informal, but equally forceful structural pressures. At the same time, she does not seem to engage in sufficient detail with the different shapes and forms of agency that open up moral dilemmas and raise issues around integrity – and how these should be interpreted in a particular context.

So rather than simply testing Archer's theory, I have proposed my own conceptual. In this light, my study has taken Archer's work further as it brings to the surface new ways of looking at the structure-agency interplay, and articulates different perspectives on how we can define the outcome of their interaction. First, I built on her account by stressing that the *interplay* of structure and agency is heavily *contextualised* by the place of study, in order to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' theorising; a cautious qualification which Archer does not acknowledge in her work. Secondly, I also add a much broader focus on the complexities that *relationships* add to the interplay between structure and agency in ECAs' decision-making, moving beyond the Archerian 'communicative reflexives' which she attributes only to a particular set of people. Thirdly, in regards to *temporality*, while Archer is mainly concerned with showing that structures are temporally prior to agency in the 'morphogenetic cycle', my recognition of temporality is more focused on the ways in which structure and agency dynamically shape one another over time in different time frames.

3. Research design and methodology

In exploring the experiences of ECAs, my intention was to capture and describe situations and moments as they were reconstructed in the participants' accounts. In contrast to much of the literature concerning academics that is largely survey based, I decided to employ a qualitative

methodological approach. This allowed me to go deeply into the thinking and decision-making of individual participants and to highlight the highly personal ways in which they navigate their career trajectories and day-to-day lives, while at the same time allowing me to outline the broader structural landscape and the impact it has on the experiences of participants. Regarding this point, I was able to show that a qualitative research perspective can help to communicate both the agency of individuals and the structures that are relevant to their ways of acting. This approach is currently shared by only a few studies, and it represents an emerging aspect of higher education research.

Initially when I began my research, my intention was to concentrate solely on the experiences of ECAs. However, early on, for reasons that I have outlined in Chapter 3, it appeared fruitful to broaden the scope of my investigation by interviewing university administrators and incorporating their respective views on the situation within Macedonian higher education. To the best of my knowledge, my study is a rare (if not only) example that has taken up this approach and I believe that this distinct framing can be a helpful addition in thinking about - and accounting for – the experiences of ECAs in other contexts as well.

Interviewing UAs added significant value to my empirical findings in two ways. First, it enabled me to provide a richer understanding of the Macedonian higher education landscape; secondly, it allowed me to illustrate some of the key challenges and pressures that institutions were facing from a human resource perspective, and the extent to which UAs can or try to impact the system.

While my aim in interviewing UAs was to examine their views on structures and how they are shaping structures, inevitably, it was also about their agency as administrators and how much they can influence what is going on in the system. When it comes to the national policy arena,

they seemed to have little power to influence policy or resist pressures coming from the State. At the institutional level, however, it was evident that they have more power and autonomy. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, UAs seemed to have a misplaced sense of agency. They were more focused on how they can exercise agency 'above' (i.e. at national level), rather than 'below' (i.e. at the institutional level) where it was clear that they have more space for improvement and intervention. This had obvious consequences for their understanding of the problems and challenges that characterised the lives of ECAs.

Generally, compared to what ECAs shared, it seemed that UAs were lacking in awareness, or perhaps interest, in dealing with the complex circumstances that ECAs faced. What was evident is that UAs were sometimes downplaying certain problems and offered less nuanced view on things compared to ECAs. For instance, around appointment procedures or workload, their views were far more clear-cut than the ways ECAs unpacked these issues. What was additionally noticeable was that, in several cases, UAs tended to perceive the new generation of young academics as the source of the problem, rather than the institutional climate in which they worked. The avoidance of acknowledging that there are structural and systemic issues that contribute to the difficulties faced by ECAs creates what McAlpine et al. (2012: 521) call 'a culture of institutional neglect'.

In some instances, both types of participants shared similar views. Being 'homegrown' is a good example of this, where clearly both UAs and ECAs had a positive stance, most likely because many of the interviewees are beneficiaries of the current homegrown orientation of the system and therefore see the virtues in it. However, in many other instances, comparing the perspectives of ECAs and UAs shows several divergences, particularly around the problems of teaching workload, research time, informal and political influences on promotion, and retention, which were described far more acutely by ECAs. My work thus signifies that Macedonian

higher education is a contested space where ECAs and UAs have their own ways of seeing, reasoning and imagining based on their positionality within the system.

4. Implications for policy and recommendations

I wrote this thesis with several audiences in mind: (1) researchers interested in higher education research within peripheral and non-peripheral contexts who may find the Macedonian case interesting; (2) in the national context, those who influence higher education and academic careers by way of policy, professional development, reward systems and advocacy, such as senior academics, mentors, administrators, deans, rectors, politicians and others dealing with academic matters; and (3) current and prospective academics at all stages within and beyond the Macedonian context, who can learn from this study as they explore possible career options, refine their day-to-day strategies of action and decision-making in addressing challenges and seeking opportunities, and ultimately reflect on their own personal experience by reading the real-life stories of their peers and colleagues.

My research, in this respect, has important insights for policy understandings of the Macedonian higher education landscape. To achieve the much-needed reform, North Macedonia's universities and State authorities need to address the following: (1) Develop policies and interventions tailored to the context and the tradition of higher education in North Macedonia in order to be successful and sustainable. For this to be achieved, such efforts should not aim simply to 'download' international practices or reflect the vision of the State, but should be established in close cooperation with the universities themselves and the communities that are going be directly impacted. (2) Encourage a more open university culture: this is in order to

reinvigorate the academic environment with new ideas, as well as increase universities' reflection, transparency and accountability towards the general public, students and the academic community. (3) Build a better infrastructure. This includes providing universities with funding and logistics to improve their technological equipment for research and teaching, and providing access to online libraries to compensate for the lack and out-of-date nature of resources. (4) Work in local and international partnerships to expand the orientation of universities beyond their immediate roles as institutions concerned with teaching.

In the context of ECAs specifically, and from their own perspective, there is a need to focus on the following efforts: (1) Universities should aim to attract early career staff from a 'wider range of backgrounds' (Julijan), so as to balance between homegrown candidates and those who have studied in other environments (especially internationally). (2) In order to be able to attract 'the best and the brightest' (Oliver), universities and the state will need to offer 'better remuneration' (Tina), 'more tolerable day-to-day work arrangements' (Ana) and the 'flexibility to choose between teaching and research' (Tomas), 'improve the way promotion procedures are handled' (Konrad), and 'make institutional support available' (Irena) (such as mentorship, scholarships to study abroad, funding for conferences and so on.). All these things would help the new generation of academics to feel 'appreciated' (Ljubica), 'respected' (Laze), 'enthusiastic' (Denis), and 'ready to learn'(Zlatan) and to contribute towards 'improving the quality' (Melita) of higher education in North Macedonia. (3) Finally, increasing ECAs' involvement in how their institutions are governed will 'increase democratic practices at universities and empower us to act as agents of change in our community' (Iva).

5. Avenues for future research

My thesis opens several opportunities for further research, for myself and others. First, I hope it encourages scholars to take a closer look at the experiences of ECAs in peripheral contexts and how these experiences relate to what we see in non-peripheral contexts. It also invites a comparison between peripheral contexts and the implications that my findings have in other countries that have similar kinds of higher education systems. Such a research agenda, I believe, would provide for a generally better understanding of academic life across different contexts.

One also wonders the extent to which this more nuanced understanding of the interplay of structure and agency I have proposed will emerge in studies of other peripheral and non-peripheral systems. It will be especially interesting to see if the 'informal' is more common in peripheral higher education academies or more powerful? And whether it perhaps exists in non-peripheries as well but remains invisible?

Even though I do not explicitly refer to the term 'precarity' in this thesis, the experiences of ECAs are reflected within this literature. It can be said that ECAs in North Macedonia have at least one thing in common with their peers in non-peripheries: a shared sense of the precarity of academic life. But this sense of shared precariousness does not mean that all precariousness is the same, nor that ECAs experience precarious work in the same way. In this respect, my thesis opens several important questions for scholarship on academic precarity: Is research on academic precarity best done in peripheral contexts? Is this where we can most understand what is going on? Is there a need to talk about different levels of 'precarious living' (Peacock 2016: 96) which exist internationally, especially in peripheries? And as Thorkelson (2016: 481) concludes with regret, why has precarity-focused literature on higher education 'never appeared in the contexts that seemed empirically to demand it the most'?. In other words, why not enough research is done in the most precarious contexts?

Another important lens would be to follow ECAs and their experiences longitudinally, which for now 'is relatively rare' (McAlpine 2016: 38). In relation to my own work it would be interesting to study, for instance in five years from now, what has happened with the participants that I have interviewed: did they get their promotion? Did those who were thinking of leaving actually leave?; Did the workload relax as some hoped? Did some eventually become administrators, and how are they interacting with more junior people?; And ultimately, how have the participants' views have changed over the years?. In this context, a longitudinal approach can provide new and shifting ways to understand the experiences of ECAs in North Macedonia.

Methodologically, my goal was to demonstrate how a qualitative approach can provide rich and nuanced insights into how ECAs act while elucidating the broader structural context, even though, by its nature, the qualitative approach tends to focus more on the individual narratives. In this respect, I hope that my approach will inspire others to explore the use of qualitative methods in examining the range of experiences of ECAs, and use them as a means by which to capture the interplay between structure and agency.

Conceptually, I hope my framework will be used by other higher education researchers, with their own adjustments in their own contexts. This kind of framework, I believe, could be also used for research on non-academic careers in North Macedonia and elsewhere, because of the nested nature of the constraints and affordances that are present across many parts of the labour sector. In this context, one might ask, are the things that we see specific to academia, or are there similarities between what goes on in many different labour markets (such as health, business, public administration and so on)?

6. A closing and an opening

I began this thesis with a note of personal testimony, so I will conclude in the same way. As I am writing these last words of my thesis I am now back in North Macedonia after eight years of living abroad. Looking back, I now realise how much my thesis has served as a framework for imagining and negotiating my own career, and how much it has influenced my own take on academia and academic life in North Macedonia – and my possible future as an (early career) academic within the country. When I started my PhD journey I felt a deep certainty that I would go back home and work in academia, but now, like some of my participants, my thinking is more ambivalent. Do I want to be an academic in North Macedonia? This question needles me constantly, and is often followed by thinking about other dilemmas. Am I ready to go through the same journey as many of the participants? Will I be able to handle the waiting period? Have I got my own 'bulldozer professor'? What sorts of dependencies do I need to develop, and how I feel about this? One thing is, however, certain: whether I 'stay' in North Macedonia or 'go', I know this thesis places great responsibility on me and a duty to ensure that the voices of my participants are heard.

List of References

Acker, S. and Webber, M. (2017). Made to measure: early career academics in the Canadian university workplace. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(3), 541-554.

Ackermann, F., Berman, M. and Sasunkevich, O. (2017). In search for agency: examining Belarusian society from below. *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 3, 1-20.

Adriansen, H. K. (2012). Timeline interviews: a tool for conducting life history research. *Qualitative Studies*, 3(1), 40-55.

Åkerlind, G. S. (2005). Postdoctoral researchers: roles, functions and career prospects. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 24(1), 21-40.

Alkire, S. (2005). Subjective quantitative studies of human agency. *Social Indicators Research*, 74, 217-260.

Altbach, P., Yudkevich, M. and Rumble, L. E. (2015). Academic inbreeding: local challenge, global problem. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 16(3), 317-330.

Altbach, P. (2015). Building an academic career: a twenty-first century challenge. In: M. Yudkevich, P. Altbach and L. E. Rumbley (Eds.), *Young faculty in the twenty-first century - international perspectives* (pp. 5-19). New York: SUNY Press.

Andrushchak, G. and Yudkevich, M. (2012). Russian higher education salaries and contracts. In: P. Altbach, L. Reisberg, M. Yudkevich, G. Andrushchak and F. I. Pacheco (Eds.), *Paying the professoriate: a global comparison of compensation and contracts* (pp. 265-279). New York: Routledge.

Apple, M. W. (1979). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York: Routledge.

Archer, L. (2008a). The new neoliberal subjects? Young/er academics' construction of professional identity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(3), 265-285.

Archer, L. (2008b). Younger academics' constructions of 'authenticity', 'success' and professional identity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4), 385-403.

Archer, M. (1979). *Social origins of educational systems*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Archer, M. (1982). Morphogenesis versus structuration: on combining structure and action. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 33(4): 455– 483.

Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2000). *Being human: the problem of agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2007). *Making our way through the world: human reflexivity and social mobility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arifi, B. (2017). Educating students and university staff on whistle-blowers' protection as a tool for countering corruption in higher education. In M. Domanovikj, *Higher education, corruption and whistle-blowers* (pp. 164-172). Skopje: Institute for Strategic Research and Education.

Arthur, M. B. and Rousseau, D. M. (1996). *The boundaryless career. A new employment principle for a new organisational era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Arthur, M. B., Khapova, S. N. and Wilderom, C. P. M. (2005). Career success in a boundaryless career world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2): 177-202.

Ashwin, P (2008). Accounting for structure and agency in close-up research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47(3), 151-158.

Association of Private Practitioners (2019). *Doctors are leaving, who will treat us?*. Skopje: Association of Private Practitioners.

Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: graduate school as socialisation to the academic career. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(1), 94-122.

Austin, A. E., Sorcinelli, M. D. and McDaniels, D. (2007). Understanding new faculty: background, aspirations, challenges, and growth. In: R. P. Perry and J. C. Smart (Eds.), *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: an evidence-based perspective* (pp. 38-89). Netherlands: Springer.

Azizi, A. (2012). *Current situation assessments in Macedonia and its challenges for membership in the European Union*. USA: Lulu Press.

Babbie, E. R. (2012). *The practice of social research*. Belmount: Wadsworth.

Baćević, J. (2014). *From class to identity: politics of education reforms in former Yugoslavia*. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Baez, B. (2000). Race-related service and faculty of color: conceptualizing critical agency in academe. *Higher Education*, 39, 363–391.

Ball, S. (2007). *Education plc: understanding private sector participation in public sector education*. Oxon: Routledge.

Bandura A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Bandura A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: an agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-26.

Barnes, B. L., Agago O. M. and Coombs, T. W. (1998). Effects of job-related stress on faculty intention to leave academia. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(4), 457-469.

Barnett, R. (2009). *Research and teaching: A holy or an unholy alliance?*. Docència, recerca i aprenentatge. Barcelona: CIDUI.

Bartelese, J. and Huisman, J. (2008). The Bologna process. In: M. Nerad and M. Heggelund (Eds.), *Toward a global PhD? Forces and forms in doctoral education worldwide* (pp. 101-113). Washington DC: University of Washington Press.

Bassey, M. (1992). Creating education through research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 18(1), 3-16.

Bazeley, P., Kemp, L., Stevens, K., Asmar, C., Grbich, C., Marsh, H. and Bhathal, R. (1996). *A study of early career academic researchers in Australia.* Sydney: University of Western Sydney.

Bazeley, P. (2003). Defining 'early career' in research. *Higher Education*, 45(3), 257–279.

Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines.* Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE.

Berdahl, R. (1990). Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability in British universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 15(2), 169-180.

Bernard, H. R. and Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: systematic approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Bhaskar, R. (1979). *The possibility of naturalism*. New York: Routledge.

Birnbaum, R. (2007). No world-class university left behind. *International Higher Education*, 47, 7-9.

Blanton, J. S. (1983). Midwifing the dissertation. *Teaching of Psychology*, 10(2), 74–77.

Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., Lepori, B. and Musselin, C. (2011). New public management, network governance and the university as a changing professional organization. In: T. Christensen and P. Laegreid (Eds.), *The Ashgate research companion to new public management* (pp. 161-176). Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Bonetta, L. (2010). *The postdoc experience: taking a long-term view*. Science Careers.

Börzel, T. (2002). Member state responses to Europeanization. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 193-214.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: on the theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Boyer E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Branković, J. (2012). Ranking higher education institutions in Macedonia: an attempt to tackle diversification?. Retrieved from (28/06/16): http://www.herdata.org/in-focus/ranking-higher-education-institutions-in-macedonia-an-attempt-to-tackle-diversification/22

Branković, J. (2014). Positioning of private higher education institutions in the Western Balkans: Emulation, differentiation and legitimacy building. In J. Branković, M. Kovacević, P. Maassen, B. Stensaker and M. Vukasović (Eds.), *The re-institutionalization of higher education in the Western Balkans: the interplay between European ideas, domestic policies and institutional practices* (pp. 121-144). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Branković, J., Klemenčić, M., Lažetić, P. and Zgaga, P. (Eds.) (2014). *Global challenges, local responses in higher education: the contemporary issues in national and comparative perspective*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Brew, A., Boud, D., Crawford, K. and Lucas, L. (2017). Navigating the demands of academic work to shape an academic job. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(12), 2294-2304

Brounéus, K. (2011). In-depth interviewing, the process, skill and ethics of interviews in qualitative research. In: K. Höglund and M. Öberg (Eds.), *Understanding qualitative research: methods and challenges* (pp. 130–145). Oxford: Routledge.

Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bunt-Kokhuis, S. van de (1993). Reforming higher education in Eastern Europe. *Higher Education Management*, 5(3), 317-332.

Burkitt, I. (2015). Relational agency: relational sociology, agency and interaction. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 19(3), 322-339.

Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative*. New York: Routledge.

Cai, Y. and Mehari J. (2015). The use of institutional theory in higher education research. In: J. Huisman and M. Tight, *Theory and method in higher education research III* (pp. 1-25). Bingley: Emerald.

Cale, G. and Roll, L. S. (2015). Social theorizing: an interview with professor Margaret Archer. *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, 23, 158-169.

Campbell, C. M. and O'Meara, K. (2014). Faculty agency: departmental contexts that matter in faculty careers. *Research in Higher Education*, 55, 49-74.

Canaan, J. E. and Shumar, W. (2008). *Structure and agency in the neoliberal university*. New York: Routledge.

Cerych, L. and Hendrichova, J. (1994). Higher education reforms in Central and Eastern Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 29, 29-44.

Churchman, D. (2006). Institutional commitments, individual compromises: identity-related responses to compromise in an Australian university. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 28(1), 3-15.

Clark, B. (1983). *The higher education system: academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Clegg, S. (2005). Theorising the mundane: the significance of agency. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(2), 149–163.

Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(3), 329-345.

Clegg, S. (2010). Time future – the dominant discourse of higher education. *Time and Society*, 19(3), 345-364.

Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Collini, S. (2012). *What are universities for?*. London: Penguin.

Connors, B. (2015). *A study of structure and agency interactions in the changing context of English higher education*. Doctoral thesis. Retrieved from (14/07/2016): https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10021763/1/Bushra%20Connors%20final%20thesis.pdf

Corbett, A. (2011). Ping Pong: competing leadership for reform in EU higher education 1998–2006. *European Journal of Education*, 46(1), 36-53.

Coulter, C. A. and Smith, M. L. (2009). The construction zone: literary elements in narrative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(8), 577–590.

Czaplinski, P. M. (2008). *Conflict prevention and the issue of higher education in the mother tongue: the case of the Republic of Macedonia*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.

Dakowska, D. and Harmsen, R. (2015). Laboratories of reform? The Europeanization and internationalization of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(1), 4-17.

Dany, F., Louvel, S. and Valette. A. (2011). Academic Careers: the limits of the "boundaryless approach" and the power of promotion scripts. *Human Relations*, 64(7), 971-996.

Daly, C. J. and Dee, J. R. (2006). Greener pastures. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77, 776–803.

Davis, B. and Petersen, E. B. (2005). Neoliberal discourse in the academy: the forestalling of (collective) resistance. *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences*, 2(2), 77–98.

Deem, R. and Brehony, K. (2005). Management as ideology: the case of 'new managerialism' in higher education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31(2), 217-235.

DiCicco-Bloom, B. and Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314–321.

Dill, D. D. and Soo, M. (2005). Academic quality, league tables, and public policy: A cross-national analysis of university ranking systems. *Higher Education*, 49, 495–533

Dobbins, M. and Knill, C. (2009). Higher education policies in Central and Eastern Europe: convergence toward a common model?. *Governance*, 22(3), 397-430.

Dobbins, M. (2011). *Higher education policies in Central and Eastern Europe: convergence towards a common model?*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dobbins, M. and Khachatryan, S. (2015). Europeanization in the "Wild East"? Analyzing higher education governance reform in Georgia and Armenia. *Higher Education*, 69(2), 189-207.

Dokmanovikj, M. (2017) (Ed.). *Higher education, corruption and whistle-blowers*. Skopje: Institute for Strategic Research and Education.

Dolenec, D., Baketa, N. and Maassen, P. (2014). Europeanizing higher education and research systems of the Western Balkans. In: P. Maassen and B. Stensaker (Eds.), *The re-institutionalizations of higher education in the Western Balkans* (pp. 147-173). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Dowd, K. O. and Kaplan, D. M. (2005). The career life of academics: boundaried or boundaryless?, *Human Relations*, 58(6): 699-721.

Elder-Vass, D. (2010). *The causal power of social structures: emergence, structure and agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elliot, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.

Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A. (1998). What is agency?. *American Journal of Sociology*, 104(4), 962-1023.

Enders, J. and Kaulisch, M. (2006). The binding and unbinding of academic careers. In: U. Teichler (Ed.), *The formative years of scholars* (pp. 85-95). London: Portland Press.

Engeström, Y. and Miettinen, R. (1999). Introduction. In: Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen and R. L. Punamäki (Eds.). *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 5-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

European Commission (2016). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2015.* Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission (2017). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2016*. Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission (2018). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2017*. Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission (2019). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2018*. Brussels: European Commission.

European Council (2000). *Lisbon strategy*. Brussels: European Council.

European University Association (EUA) (2017). *St Paul the Apostle University of Information Science and Technology, Evaluation report*. Brussels: EUA.

Feldman, D. C. and Ng, T. W. H. (2007). Careers: mobility, embeddedness, and success. *Journal of Management,* 33(3), 350-77.

Felt, U. (2009). *Knowing and living in academic research*. Prague: Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

Ferguson, J. (2015). *Give a man a fish: reflections on the new politics of distribution*. Durham: Duke University Press.

File, J. and Goedegebuure, L. (2003). *Real-time systems: reflections on higher education in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia*. Netherlands: CHEPS University of Twente.

Finkelstein, M., Seal, R. and Schuster, J. (1998). *The new academic generation: a profession in transformation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Flander, A. and Klemenčič, M. (2014). Will academics drive or obstruct the Slovenian government's internationalisation agenda for higher education?. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 4(2), 27-48.

Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom House Country Report: Macedonia*. Washington: Freedom House.

Frølich, N., Huisman, J., Slipersæter, S., Stensaker, B. and Bótas, P. (2013). A reinterpretation of institutional transformations in European higher education: strategising pluralistic organisations in multiplex environments. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 79-93.

Galaz-Fontes, J. F., Arimoto, A., Teichler, U. and Brennan, J. (Eds.) (2016). *Biographies and careers throughout academic life*. Cham: Springer.

Galevski, M. (2013a). The knowledge-based economy as a key legitimating concept of the neo-liberal university in the EU. In: K. Thorsten, A. Meerman, T. Baaken and P. Sijde (Eds.), *University-industry interaction: challenges and solutions for fostering entrepreneurial universities and collaborative innovation* (pp. 736-757). Amsterdam: The University Industry Innovation Network.

Galevski, M. (2013b). The EU 2020 education attainment target: a critical assessment. *EIHER-WBC Working Paper Series 2013*, 2, 1-28.

Galevski, M. (2014a). *The academic profession in Macedonia: conditions and challenges* (Unpublished Master's thesis). Tampere: University of Tampere.

Galevski, M. (2014b). The academic profession in Macedonia: A potential large-scale exodus in sight. *Higher Education in Russia and Beyond*, 1(2), pp. 22-23.

Galevski, M. (2014c). Dimensions of higher education governance in Macedonia: exploring the roles of the state. In: P. Maassen and B. Stensaker (Eds*.), The re-institutionalizations of higher education in the Western Balkans* (pp. 147-173). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Galevski, M and Mihut, G. (2014). Higher education governance equalizer: a comparative case of Slovenia, Romania, Serbia and Macedonia in the context of EU membership status. In: A. Pausits, G. Zheng and R. T. Abebe (Eds.), *New public management in higher education - international overview and analysis* (pp. 123-137). Danube University Krems: Krems.

Gardner, S. (2009). Conceptualizing success in doctoral education: perspectives of faculty in seven disciplines. *Review of Higher Education*, 32(3), 383–406.

Garforth, L. and Cervinkova, A. (2009). Times and trajectories in academic knowledge production. In: Felt, U. (Ed), *Knowing and living in academic research: convergence and heterogeneity in research cultures in the European Context* (pp. 169-226). Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

Georgieva, P. (2002). *Higher education in Bulgaria*. Bucharest: UNESCO CEPES.

Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P. and Trow, M. (1994). *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary society*. London: Sage.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Giesecke, H. C. (1999). The rise of private higher education in East Central Europe. *Society and Economy in Central and Eastern Europe*, 21(1), 132-156.

Giles, G. (1979). *Higher education in Yugoslavia: Yale higher education research group working paper.* Washington: ERIC Clearinghouse.

Gjuzelov, B. (2012). *Making the transition end?: Social capital in the Republic of Macedonia and its impact on the development of democratic institutions* (Master's thesis). Flensburg: University of Flensburg.

Glaser, J. (2001). Macrostructures, careers and knowledge production: a neoinstitutionalist approach. *Journal of Technology Management*, 22(7/8), 698-715.

Golde, C. M. and Dore, T. M. (2001). *At cross purposes: what the experiences of today's doctoral students reveal about doctoral education*. Philadelphia: Pew Charitable Trusts.

Gonzales, L. D. (2012). Responding to mission creep: faculty members as cosmopolitan agents. *Higher Education*, 61(1), 1–17.

Gonzales, L. D. (2014) Framing faculty agency inside striving universities: an application of Bourdieu's theory of practice. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 85(2), 193-218.

Gornitzka, Å. (1999). Governmental policies and organisational change in higher education. *Higher Education*, 38(1), 5-31.

Gornitzka, Å. and Maassen, P. (2000). Hybrid steering approaches with respect to European higher education. *Higher Education Policy*, 13(3), 267-287.

Gornitzka, Å. (2006). What is the use of Bologna in national reform? The case of Norwegian Quality Reform in higher education. In V. Tomusk, V. (ed.), *Creating the European Higher Education Area: Voices from the Periphery* (pp. 19-41). Dordrecht: Springer.

Gumport, P. J. (2012). Strategic thinking in higher education research. In: M. N. Bastedo (Ed.), *The organization of higher education: managing colleges for a new era* (pp. 18-41). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Guzmán-Valenzuela, C. and Barnett, R. (2013) Academic fragilities in a marketised age: the case of Chile. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(2), 203-220.

Hajrullai, H. (2015). *What do media, corruption, and higher education have in common in Macedonia?*. Paper presented at the 7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, 05-07 February, Athens, Greece.

Hallak, J. and Poisson, M. (2007). *Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?*. UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning.

Harley S., Muller-Camen M. and Collin, A. (2004). From academic communities to managed organisations: the implication for academic careers in UK and German universities. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(2), 329-45.

Harvey, L. and Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9– 34.

Hazelkron, E. (2017). *Rankings and higher education: reframing relationships within and between states.* Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series (working paper no. 19). London: Centre for Global Higher Education.

Hening, D. and Makovicky, N. (2017). *Economies of favour after socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Henkel, M. (2002). Academic identity in transformation? The case of the UK. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14(3), 137-147.

Henkel, M. (2004). Current science policies and their implications for the formation and maintenance of academic identity. *Higher Education Policy*, 17(2), 167-182.

Hertz, R. (1997). *Reflexivity and voices*. London: SAGE Publications.

Heynemann, S. P., Anderson, H. K. and Nuraliyeva, N. (2008). The cost of corruption in higher education. *Comparative Education Review*, 52(1), 1–25.

Hislope, R. (2013). Macedonia. In: S. Berglund, J. Ekman, K. Deegan-Krause and T. Knutsen, *Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (pp. 607-640). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Hochschild, J. L. (2009). Conducting intensive interviews and elite interviews. *Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research.*

Hodkinson, P. and Sparkes, A. C. (1997). Careership: a sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29–44.

Holley, K. A. and Colyar, J. (2009). Rethinking texts: narrative and the construction of qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(9), 680–686.

Horta, H., Sato, M. and Yonezawa, A. (2011). Academic inbreeding: exploring its characteristics and rationale in Japanese universities using a qualitative perspective. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 12, 35–44.

Hufner, K. (Ed.) (1995). *Higher education reform processes in Central and Eastern Europe*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Humprey, C. (2017). A new look at favours: The case of post-socialist higher education. In: D. Hening and N. Makovicky, *Economies of favour after socialism* (pp. 50-73). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Janeva, V., Gjorgjiovska, J., Kitanovska, M. and Andov, S. (2018*). Why young people want to leave Macedonia?*. Skopje: Youth Educational Forum.

Jazvac-Martek, M., Chen, S. and McAlpine, L. (2011). Tracking the doctoral student experience over time: cultivating agency in diverse spaces. In: L. McAlpine and C. Amundsen (Eds.), *Doctoral education: research-based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators* (pp. 17-36). Dordrecht: Springer.

Jessop, B. (2017). On academic capitalism. *Critical Policy Studies*, 12(1), 104-109.

Kahn, P. (2009a). Contexts for teaching and the exercise of agency in early-career academics: perspectives from realist social theory. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 14(3), 197-207.

Kahn, P. (2009b). On establishing a modus vivendi: the exercise of agency in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education. *London Review of Education*, 7(3), 261-270.

Kahn, P., Qualter, A. and Young, R. (2012). Structure and agency in learning: a critical realist theory of the development of capacity to reflect on academic practice. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31(6), 859-871.

Karklins, R. (2002). Typology of post-communist corruption. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 49, 22– 32.

Kehm, M. and Teichler, U. (Eds.) (2013). *The academic profession in Europe: new tasks and new challenges*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Kelly, R. and Boden, R. (2014). How management accounting shapes academic lives. In: L. Gornall, C. Cook, L. Daunton, J. Salisbury and Thomas, B. (Eds.), *Academic working lives: experience, practice and change* (pp. 94-101). London: Bloomsbury.

Keszei, E. (2015). Financing universities in post-communist countries – a comparative study. *Central European Higher Education Cooperation Conference Proceedings.*

King, A. (2010). The odd couple: Margaret Archer, Anthony Giddens and British social theory. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61, 253-260.

Klemenčič, M. and Zgaga, P (2014). Public-private dynamics in higher education in the Western Balkans. *European Education*, 46(3), 31-54.

Klemenčič, M. and Zgaga, P. (2015). Slovenia: The slow decline of academic inbreeding. In M. Yudkevich, P. G. Altbach, and L. E. Rumbley (Eds.), Academic inbreeding and mobility in higher education. *Global perspectives* (pp. 156–181). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Klemenčič, M. and Flander, A. (2015). *Academic profession and the conditions of academic work in Slovenia: findings of the 2013 EUROAC survey*. Ljubljana: Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes.

Kligyte, G. (2011). Transformation narratives in academic practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 201-213.

Knight, P. and Trowler, P. (2001). *Departmental leadership in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Knox, S. and Burkard, A. W. (2009). Qualitative research interviews. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(4–5), 566–575.

Kogan, M. (2000). Higher education communities and academic identity. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 54(3), 207-216.

Kogan, M. and Teichler, U. (Eds.) (2007). Key challenges to the academic profession. *Werkstattberichte/International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel*, 65. Kassel: Jenior.

Korunovska-Srbijanko, J., Korunovska-Avramovska, N. and Maleska, T. (2011). *Capitulation, confusions or resistance: social capital among Macedonian high-school students*. Skopje: Youth Educational Forum.

Kozma, T., Rebay, M., Ohidy, A. and Szolar, E. (Eds.) (2014). *The Bologna process in Central and Eastern Europe.* Berlin: Springer.

Kreceva, K. (2008). *How to achieve quality higher education in Macedonia*. Skopje: Analytica.

Kuraev, A. (2016). Soviet higher education: an alternative construct to the western university paradigm. *Higher Education*, 71, 181-193.

Kwiek, M. (2003). Academe in transition: transformations in the Polish academic profession. *Higher Education*, 45(4), 455-476.

Kwiek, M. (2004). The international attractiveness of the academic profession in Europe: the case of Poland. In: J. Enders and E. de Weert (Eds.), *The international attractiveness of the academic profession* (pp. 332-348). The Netherlands: CHEPS University of Twente.

Kwiek, M. (2007). Emergent European educational policies under scrutiny: the Bologna Process from a Central European perspective. *European Educational Research Journal*, 3(4), 759-776.

Kwiek, M. (2014). Structural changes in the Polish higher education system (1990-2010): a synthetic view. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 4(3), 266-280.

Kwiek, M. (2015). The internationalization of research in Europe. A quantitative study of 11 national systems from a micro-level perspective. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 19(2), 341-359.

Kwiek, M. (2017). De-privatization in higher education: a conceptual approach. *Higher Education*, 74, 259-281.

Laudel, G. and Glaser, J. (2008). From apprentice to colleague: the metamorphosis of early career researchers. *Higher Education*, 55, 387-406.

Layder, D. (1997). *Modern social theory: key debates and new directions*. London: University College London Press.

Ledeneva, A. (1998). *Russia's economy of favours: blat, networking, and informal exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ledeneva, A. (2013). *Can Russia Modernize? Sistema, power networks and informal governance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ledeneva, A. (2017). The ambivalence of favour: paradoxes of Russia's economy of favours. In: D. Hening and N. Makovicky, *Economies of favour after socialism* (pp. 21-49). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leišytė, L. (2016). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(5), 828-846.

Leišytė, L. and Wilkesmann U. (2016). *Organizing academic work in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Levin et al. (2020). *University management, the academic profession, and neoliberalism.* New York: SUNY Press.

Lindholm, J. A. (2003). Perceived organizational fit: nurturing the minds, hearts, and personal ambitions of university faculty. *Review of Higher Education*, 27, 125-14.

Liviu, M. (2015). Addressing challenges in higher education in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. In: *Central European higher education cooperation Conference* (pp. 40-48). Budapest: Corvinus University of Budapest Digital Press.

Locke, W., Cummings, W. K. and Fisher, D. (Eds.) (2011). *Changing governance and management in higher education: the perspectives of the academy*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Luckett, K. and Luckett, T. (2009). The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: a social realist analysis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 469-481.

Lynch, K. and Ivancheva, M. (2015). Academic freedom and the commercialisation of universities: a critical ethical analysis. *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, 15, 71-85.

Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences (MAAS) (2017). *Priorities of the future development of the Republic of Macedonia - Quo Vadis Res Publica Macedonia?*. Skopje: Macedonia.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching*. London: SAGE Publications.

Mathieson, S. (2011). Developing academic agency through critical reflection: a sociocultural approach to academic induction programmes. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 243-256.

McAlpine, L. and Åkerlind, G. S. (Eds.) (2010). *Becoming an academic: international perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McAlpine, L. and Amundsen, C. (Eds.) (2011). *Doctoral education: research-based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators.* Netherlands: Springer.

McAlpine, L. (2012). Academic work and careers: re-location, re-location, re-location. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 66(2): 174–88.

McAlpine, L. and Turner, G. (2012). Imagined and emerging career patterns: perceptions of doctoral students and research staff. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 36(4), 535-548.

McAlpine, L., Paulson, J., Gonsalves, A. and Jazvack-Martek, M. (2012). 'Untold' doctoral stories: can we move beyond cultural narratives of neglect?. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 31(4), *511-523.*

McAlpine, L., Amundsen, C. and Turner, G. (2014). Identity-trajectory: reframing early career academic experience. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(6), 952-969.

McAlpine, L. and Emmioğlu, E. (2014). Navigating careers: the perceptions of sciences doctoral students, post-phd researchers and pre-tenure academics. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1770–1785.

McAlpine, L. and Amundsen, C. (2016). *Post-PhD career trajectories: intentions, decision-making and life aspirations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McAlpine (2016). Why might you use narrative methodology? A story about narrative. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri*, 4(1), 32-57.

McAlpine L. and Amundsen, S. (2018). *Identity-trajectories of early career researchers: unpacking the post-PhD experience.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Mojanoski, C., Sazdova-Malis, M., Nikolovski, M. and Krstevska, K. (2015). *Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia on corruption (research report 2013-2015)*. Skopje: UNODC.

Morphew, C. C. and Huisman, J. (2002). Using institutional theory to reframe research on academic drift. *Higher Education in Europe*, 27(4), 491-506.

Müller, R. and Kenney, M. (2014). Agential Conversations: interviewing postdoctoral life scientists and the politics of mundane research practices. *Science as Culture*, 23(4), 537-559.

Musselin, C. (2005). European academic labor markets in transition. *Higher Education*, 49(1), 135-154.

Musselin, C. (2007). The transformation of academic work: facts and analysis. *Research and occasional paper series* (CSHE.4.07). California: University of California.

Neumann, A., Terosky, A. L. and Schell, J. (2006). Agents of learning: strategies for assuming agency, for learning, in tenured faculty careers. In: S. J. Bracken, J. K. Allen, and D. R. Dean (Eds.), *Gendered perspectives in faculty roles and work-lives* (pp. 91–120). Sterling: Stylus.

Neumann, A. and Pereira, K. B. (2009). Becoming strategic: recently tenured university professors as agents of scholarly learning. In: A. Neumann (Ed.), *Professing to learn: Creating tenured lives and careers in the American research university* (pp. 137-171). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Nowotny, H., Scott, P. and Gibbons, M. (2003). '*Mode 2' revisited: the new production of knowledge*. Minerva, 41(3), 179-194.

Offe, C. (1994). Designing institutions for East European transitions. *Paper presented at the Institute for Advanced Studies, October 1994.*

Olssen, M. and Peters, M. A. (2007). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313-345.

O'Meara, K., Terosky, L. A. and Neumann A. (2008). *Faculty careers and work lives: a professional growth perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

O'Meara, K. and Campbell, C. (2011). Faculty sense of agency in decisions about work and family. *The Review of Higher Education*, 34(3), 447-476.

O'Meara (2012). A career with a view: agentic perspectives of women faculty. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the association of the study of higher education.* Las Vegas, Nevada.

Osbild, R. and Bartlett, W. (2019). *Western Balkan economies in transition*. Berlin: Springer.

Oushakine, S. (2013). Postcolonial estrangements: claiming a space between Stalin and Hitler. In: J. Buckler and E. D. Johnson (Eds.), *Rites of place: public commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (pp. 285–315). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Outhwaite, W. (1998). Realism and social science. In: M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson and A. Norrie (Eds), *Critical realism: essential readings* (pp. 45-60). London: Routledge.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation method*. London: SAGE Publications.

Pausits, A. and Pellert, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Higher education management and development in Central, Southern and Eastern Europe*. Münster: Waxman.

Peacock, V. (2016). Academic precarity in the Max Planck Society. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(1): 95–119.

Perlmutter, D. D. (2010). *Promotion and tenure confidential*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Petkovska, S. (2011). *An analysis of financial autonomy in Macedonian higher education Master*. University of Aveiro, Aveiro.

Petruševski, V. and Najčevska, M. (2011). The revisions of the Law on Higher Education in Macedonia: a cha(lle)nge in the educational policy?. *Political Thought*, 33(3), 11-17.

Polese, A., Morris, J., Kovacs, B. and Harboe, I. (2016). 'Welfare states' and social policies in Eastern Europe and the former USSR: where informality fits in?. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 22(2), 184-198.

Popovski, Z. (2010). *The quality of higher education under question: the dispersion as a Macedonian phenomenon.* Skopje: FIOM.

Powell, W. W. and DiMaggio, P. J. (1991). The new institutionalism in organizational analysis. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147–160.

Pringle, J. K. and Mallon, M. (2003). Challenges for the boundaryless career odyssey. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(5), 839-853.

Rabe, M. and Rugunanan (2011). Is there a life after sociology? Exploring the career paths of former South African academics in sociology. *South African Review of Sociology*, 42(3), 60-78.

Reactor (2012). *Youth and the labour market*. Skopje: Reactor.

Reay, D. (1998). *Class work: mother's involvement in their children's primary schooling*. London: UCL Press.

Remmik, M., Karm, M., Haamer, A. and Lepp, L. (2011). Early-career academics' learning in academic communities. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 187-199.

Reybold, E. L. and Alamia, J. J. (2008). Academic transitions in education: a developmental perspective of women faculty experiences. *Journal of Career Development*, 35(2), 107-128.

Rhoades, G., Kiyama, J., McCormick, R. and Quiroz, M. (2008). Local cosmopolitans and cosmopolitan locals: new models of professionals in the academy. *Educational Policy Studies and Practice*, 31(2), 209-235.

Roncevic, N. and Rafajac, B. (2010). *Changes in the academic profession: Comparative analysis*. Rijeka: Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci.

Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosser, J. V. (2004). Faculty members intentions to leave: a national study on their worklife and satisfaction. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(3), 285-309.

Rupnik, J. (1992). Higher education reform process in Central and Eastern Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 27(1/2), 145-153.

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

Schuurman, N. (2009). Work, life, and creativity among academic geographers. *Progress in Human Geography*, 33(3), 307-312.

Scott, C. James (1998). *Seeing like a State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. London: Yale University Press.

Scott, P. (2002). Reflections on the reform of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. *Higher Education in Europe*, 27(1-2), 137-152.

Sewell, W. H. (1992). A theory of structure: duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1), 1-29.

Sfard, A. and Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: in search of an analytical tool for investigating learning as culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, 34(4), 14-22.

Shore, C. and Wright, S. (2000). Coercive accountability: the rise of audit culture in higher education. In: M. Strathern (Ed.), *Audit cultures* (pp. 57-89). London: Routledge.

Siljanovska-Davkova, G. (2005). Organisational structures and internal party democracy in the Republic of Macedonia. In G. Karasimeonov, *Organisational Structures and Internal Party Democracy in South Eastern Europe* (pp. 24-61). Sofia: Gorex Press.

Silverman, D. (2004). *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

Slantcheva, S. (2003). The Bulgarian academic profession in transition. *Higher Education*, 45, 425-454.

Slantcheva, S. and Levy, D. (Eds.) (2007). *Private higher education in post-communist Europe: in search of legitimacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L. L. (1999). *Academic capitalism: politics, policies and the entrepreneurial university.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Smart, C. J. (1990). A causal model of faculty turnover intentions. *Research in Higher Education*, 31(5), 405-424.

Smith, A. (2009). *Research methodologies.* London: Zed Books.

Smolentseva, A. (2003). Challenges to the Russian academic profession. *Higher Education*, 45(4), 391-424.

Solem, M. N. and Foote, K. E. (2004). Concerns, attitudes, and abilities of early career geography faculty. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1(4), 889–912.

Sorcinelli, M. D., Austin, A. E. and McDaniels, M. (2007). Understanding new faculty: background, aspirations, challenges, and growth. In: R. Perry and J. Smart (Eds.), *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: an evidence-based perspective* (pp. 39-89). Dordrecht: Springer.

State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia (SSORM) (2020). *MakStat database.*

Stensaker, B., Brankovic, J., Kovacevic, M., Maassen, P. and Vukasović, M. (2014). Introduction. In: J. Brankovic, M. Kovacevic, P. Maassen, B. Stensaker and M. Vukasović (Eds.), *The reinstitutionalization of higher education in the Western Balkans: The interplay between European ideas, domestic policies and institutional practices* (pp. 9-18). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Steriglov, I. (2015). No success: performance of ex-comecon universities in international rankings. *Higher Education in Russia and beyond*, 2(4), 10-12.

Stevanovikj, M., Velvkovski, Z., Korobar, P. V., Dzukeska, E., Zdraveva, N. (2019*). University autonomy in Macedonian higher education*. Skopje: Open Society Institute.

Stich, A., Ziegele, F. and Mojsovska-Blazevski, N. (2011). *Higher education funding in Macedonia*. (Unpublished report).

Stojanov, G. and Angeloska, N. (2006). The higher education system in Macedonia: overview, reforms, and prospects. *European Education,* 38(1), 44-59.

Strathern, M. (2000) (Ed.). *Audit cultures: anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*. London: Routledge.

Sukes, M. G. and Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22(6), 664-670.

Sutherland, L. and Taylor, L. (2011). The development of identity, agency and community in the early career stages of the academic career. *International Journal for Academic Developme*nt, 16(3), 183–186.

Sutherland, K., Wilson, M. and Williams, P. (2013). *Success in academia? The experiences of early career academics in New Zeland universities.* Victoria: AKO.

Sutherland, K. A. (2015). Constructions of success in academia: an early career perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(4), 743-759.

Tan, S. (2011). Understanding the structure and agency debate in the social sciences. *Habitus*, 1, 36-52.

Taylor, P. (2008). Being an academic today. In: R. Barnett and R. Di Napoli (Eds.), *Changing identities in higher education: voicing perspectives* (pp. 27-39). Abingdon: Routledge.

Teichler, U. (2005). Research on higher education in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 40(4), 447-469.

Teichler, U., Arimoto, A. and Cummings, W. K. (Eds.) (2013). *The changing academic profession: major findings of a comparative survey*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Terosky, A. and O'Meara, K. (2011). Assuming agency: the power of strategy and networks in faculty professional lives. *Liberal Education*, 97(3/4), 54-59.

Terosky, L. A., O'Meara K. and Campbell, C. M. (2014). Enabling possibility: women associate professors' sense of agency in career advancement. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7(1), 58-76.

The Guardian (2019, online). *'EU failure to open membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia condemned*'. 18th October, 2019.

The World Bank (2016). Design and implementation of a sustainable funding model for the Macedonian tertiary education system. Skopje: World Bank. (Unpublished report)

The World Bank (2019). *Doing business 2019.* Washington DC: The World Bank.

The World Bank (2019). *Migration and brain-drain in Europe and Central Asia.* Washington, DC: World Bank.

Thorkelson, E. (2012). Navigating doctoral socialisation in Anthropology. *Learning and Teaching*, 5(1), 1-9.

Thorkelson, E. (2016). Precarity outside: the political unconscious of French academic labor. *American Ethnologist*, 43(3), 475-487.

Tight, M. (2004). Higher education research: an a-theoretical community of practice?. *Higher Education Research and Development,* 23(4), 395-411.

Tomusk, V. (2003). Aristoscientists, academic proletariat and reassembling the mega-machine: 21st century survival strategies of the Estonian academia. *International studies in Sociology of Education*, 13(1), 77-99.

Tomusk, V. (2004). *The open world and closed societies: essays on higher education policies "in transition".* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tomusk, V. (Ed.) (2007). *Creating the European area of higher education*. Dortrecht: Springer.

Topuzovska-Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M., Serafimovska, E. and Cekic, A. (2013). *Youth study Macedonia.* Skopje: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Topuzovska-Latkovikj, M., Popovska, B., Cacanovska, R., Jakjimovski, J., Sasajkovski, S., Simoska, E. and Zabijakin-Chatleska (2016). *Study on youth in Republic of Macedonia 2016*. Skopje: Institute for Social and Political-legal Research.

Transparency International (2019). *Corruption perception index.* Berlin: Transparency International.

Trowler, P. and Kinght, T. P. (1999).Organizational socialisation and induction in universities: reconceptualising theory and practice. *Higher Education*, 37, 177-195.

Trowler, P. and Kinght, T. P. (2000). Coming to know in higher education: theorising faculty entry to new work contexts. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19(1), 27-42.

Turajlic, S. (2006). Staff recruitment in higher education: country and institutional experiences - The case of Serbia. *Higher Education in Europe*, 31(3):295-302.

Turk, M. and Ledic, J. (2016). Between teaching and research: challenges of the academic profession in Croatia. *Centre for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 6(1), 95-111.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2011). *Corruption in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: bribery as experienced by the population*. UNODC: Vienna.

Vogler, G. (2016). Power between habitus and reflexivity - introducing Margaret Archer to the power debate. *Journal of Political Power*, 9(1), 65-82.

Vukasović, M., Babin, M., Ivosevic, V., Lazetic, P. and Miklavic, K. (Eds.) (2009*). Financing higher education in South-Eastern Europe: Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia.* Belgrade: Centre for Education Policy.

Vukasović, M. (2012). European integration in higher education in the Western Balkan countries: a review of literature. *EIHER-WBC Working Paper Series*, 1(1), 1-46.

Vukasović, M. and Elken, M. (2013). Higher education policy dynamics in a multi-level governance context: a comparative study of four post-communist countries. In: P. Zgaga, U. Teichler and J. Brennan (Eds.), *The globalisation challenge for European higher education. Convergence and diversity, centres and peripheries* (pp. 261-286). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag.

Vukasović, M. (2014a). How can and how does Europe matter?. In J. Branković, M. Kovacević, P. Maassen, B. Stensaker and M. Vukasović (Eds.), *The re-institutionalization of higher education in the Western Balkans: The interplay between European ideas, domestic policies and institutional practices* (pp. 19-60).

Vukasović, M. (2014b). When and how does Europe matter? Higher education policy change in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(3), 403-423.

Waes, S. V., Bossche, V. d. P., Moolernaar, M. N. M., Stes, A. and Petegem, V. P. (2015). Uncovering changes in university teachers' professional networks during an instructional development program. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 46, 11-28.

Weijden, van der I. Teelken, C., de Boer, M. and Drost, M. (2016). Career satisfaction of postdoctoral researchers in relation to their expectations for the future. *Higher Education*, 71(1), 25-40.

Welch, A. (2005). Challenge and change: the academic profession in uncertain times. In: A. Welch (Ed.), *The professoriate: profile of a profession* (pp. 1-19). Dordrecht: Springer.

Westerheijden, D. F. and Sorensen K. (1999). People on a bridge: central European higher education in a storm of reform. In: B. W. Jongbloed, P. A. Maassen, G. Neave, G. (Eds.), *From the eye of the storm: higher education's changing institution* (pp. 13-38). Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publisher.

Westerheijden, D., Beerkens, E., Cremonini, L., Huisman, J., Kehm, B., Kovač, A., Lažetić, P., McCoshan, A., Mozuraityte, N., Souto Otero, M., de Weert, E., Witte, J. and Yagci, Y. (2010). *The first decade of working on the European Higher Education Area: executive summary, overview and conclusions.*

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2019). *The cost of migration in North Macedonia*. Skopje: North Macedonia.

Wheelahan, L. (2007). Blending activity theory and critical realism to theorise the relationship between the individual and society and the implications for pedagogy. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 183-196.

Williams, K. (2012). Rethinking 'learning' in higher education. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 11(3), 296-323.

Wray, N., Markovic, M. and Manderson, L. (2007). Researcher saturation: the impact of data triangulation and intensive-research practices on the researcher and qualitative research process. Qualitative Research, 17(10), 1392-1402.

Ylijoki, O. H. and Mantula, H. (2003). Conflicting time perspectives in academic work. *Time and Society*, 12(1), 55-78.

Ylijoki, H. O. (2005). Academic nostalgia: A narrative approach to academic work. *Human Relation*, 58, 555-576.

Ylijoki, H. O. (2010). Future orientations in episodic labour: Short-term academics as a case in point. *Time and Society*, 19(3) 365-386.

Yoshioka-Kobayashi, T. and Shibayama, S. (2020). Early career training and development of academic independence: a case of life sciences in Japan. *Studies in Higher Education* (forthcoming) https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1817889

Yudkevich, M., Altbach, P. G. and Rumbley, L. E. (Eds.) (2015*). Young faculty in the twenty-first century – international perspectives*. New York: SUNY Press.

Yudkevich, M. (2016). The university sector in Russia: young romantics and losers welcome?. In: M. Yudkevich, P. G. Altbach and L. E. Rumbley (Eds.), *Young faculty in the twenty-first century - international perspectives* (pp. 227-252). New York: SUNY Press.

Zarycki, T. (2014). *Ideologies of eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.

Zgaga, P., Klemenčič, M., Komljenovič, J., Miklavič, K., Repac, I. and Jakačič, V. (2013). *Higher education in the Western Balkans: reforms, developments, trends*. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana.

Zhivkovikj, A. (2016). *Corruption in higher education*. Skopje: Youth Educational Forum.

APPENDIX 1: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE (ECAs)

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Researcher: Martin Galevski
Contact: martin.galevski@education.ox.ac.uk
+38970448777

Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest to participate in my research. To determine if you meet the eligibility criteria and to help to get to know you better, I would like to ask you to respond to the following brief questions.
Before you start, please choose your pseudonym for the purpose of the study:_____. In the text of the study, this pseudonym will be used in place of your real name, in order to assure that your identity remains anonymous throughout the project.

Part I Background

1. Please indicate:

a) Your gender: _____

b) Your age: _____

c) Your citizenship: _____

d) Your ethnicity: _____

3. What is your highest level of education obtained? _____

4. Are you currently a (doctoral) student?

Start date: _____ (Expected) end date: _____

Part II Employment

1. In how many universities have you been employed (full or part time) up to present?

_____

(Please state the names and the employment status) _____

_____

_____

2. At which university are you currently employed? _____

3. How long have you worked at this university? _____

4. Is your current employment at the institution where you have previously undertaken or currently undertake any level of studies (e.g. undergraduate, masters, doctoral etc.)? (If yes, please name the level of studies) _____

5. What Faculty/Department are you currently employed at? _____

6. How many hours per week do you have to work based on your contract? _____

7. What is the duration of your current contract? _____

Start date: _____ (Expected) end date: _____

8. Based on your contract, you are responsible for teaching only, research only, or both? _____

9. What is your current job title/academic rank? (Please state both if different) _____

10. What position do you hope to hold immediately after this post/position ends? _____

11. Have any of the following details changed in the course of the last year? (Please fill in only if something has changed):

a) Your role (job title)? _____

b) Your academic title? _____

c) Your superior/supervisor? _____

d) The department/university you work in? _____

e) Your work status: full or part time? _____

12. Have you worked (full or part time) outside academia? (If yes, please specify where and for how long) _____

Thank you for your time and inputs so far, they are greatly appreciated! If you have any questions regarding your rights, would like more information about the study or if you have any further inquiries please do not hesitate to contact via email martin.galevski@education.ox.ac.uk, or phone +38970448777.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ECAs)

The interview usually started with an informal introduction, a point where I also restated the rights of the participants and the purpose of the study, referring to the Participant Information Sheet where necessary. Typically, the first few questions were fairly easy to respond, and usually drawn from the demographic questionnaire (e.g. Can you tell me how long have you been working in your current institution? You mentioned in the demographic questionnaire that you have also worked at_____ , right?).

Below I present the two main categories of indicative questions which provided the basis for the interviews with ECAs.

1. Cluster of indicative questions on the day-to-day time of ECAs

1.1. Past

- Can you describe how did your everyday time looked like when you began your academic career?
- How did you feel about what you were doing?
- What type of support was there? (How did you reach out for help, and where [institutionally or outside])?
- How did you navigate through difficulties?

1.2. Present

- Today, has anything changed from how you described your day-to-day time earlier? If so, what has changed?
- Can you explain a typical week (if one exists)? (e.g. courses you teach, research you do, administration etc.) And are you satisfied with how it looks?
- How do you organise your work in order to manage the workload you described?
- Can you influence the amount and type of work assigned to you?
- Are you able to strike a work-life balance?

1.3. Future

- How do you see your everyday time in the future? (Similar or different from now)
- What changes do you wish to introduce in the future? (Have you already tried to do that?)

2. Cluster of indicative questions on the career trajectory of ECAs

1.1. Past

- Can you tell me at what point did you enter academia, and how did it happen?
- How intentional was this choice to pursue an academic career?

- What attracted you to academic work?
- What factors or people influenced your thinking in making the choice to enter academia, and in what ways?
- Did you consider other options as well beside academia?
- In looking back at your decision to start an academic career, are academia and the academic career different from what you expected and envisioned before entering (if yes, in what ways)?

1.2. Present

- How would you describe where you are with your career at the moment?
- How does the experience you had described earlier compare to how you feel now about your career? (Has your experience changed in any way since you started your career?)
- Are there any difficulties that you are currently facing, and if yes what are they? (If yes, how do you manage them)
- In terms of promotion, how would you rate your chances of getting promoted? Is there anything that might inhibit/speed up your progress?
- Do you know what is expected from you to progress? And what are you doing to prepare yourself to progress to a higher academic position? (How does this affect your day-to-day time?)
- Do you consult with someone about how to progress, in your personal and professional context, and what advice are you given?
- Can they influence your progression in any way?

1.3. Future

- Where do you see your career in five years from now?
- Where are you now in achieving this goal?
- What factors or people are influencing you decisions for the future, and how?
- Have you considered a career change? (If yes, where and why)

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (UAs)

The interview usually started with an informal introduction, a point where I also restated the rights of the participants and the purpose of the study, referring to the Participant Information Sheet where necessary. Typically, with the first question I asked UAs to introduce themselves based on the institutional position they hold (e.g. how long they have been in the position, what is their responsibility etc.). Questions marked with* are questions which were asked with priority.

1. System level questions

- In your own words, how would you describe the present situation with higher education in the country?*
- How is it different from the past? (better or worse?)*
- In your opinion what are the top three challenges the system is currently facing? And to what extent are these challenges influenced by international, national or institutional factors?*

2. Institutional level questions

- What do you see as the biggest achievement of your institution in light of what you have described earlier?
- How would you position you institution in comparison to other institutions in the country?*
- How do you see you institution developing in the next ten years?*

2.1. ECAs' career trajectories

- How do you recruit ECAs (from within and/or outside)? And how difficult is it to attract them?*
- Is there a clear pathway for ECAs to progress?*
- What is your view on the promotion criteria and how they are envisioned within the Law on Higher Education? (Are they realistic and achievable?)*
- Is retention any problem? If yes, for what reasons?*
- Do you have any procedures in place to tackle challenges connected to recruitment, promotion and retention?*

2.2. ECAs' day-to-day time

- What are ECAs expected to do, and how big is their workload?*
- How autonomous can ECAs be in choosing the extent of their involvement in teaching and research?*
- How does your university/faculty support ECAs in their different roles (teaching and research)?
- Are there measures in place intended to support and/or advance the quality of teaching/research at your institution? If yes, what are they?
- How do you identify the day-to-day challenges faced by ECAs in your institution/faculty?*
- To what extent are they represented in decision-making bodies? Is their voice heard?*