

## **THE PARTICIPATION OF EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING BODIES OF A GERMAN UNIVERSITY**

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### **Abstract**

In the European higher education landscape, Early Career Researchers (ECRs) often face exclusion from participating in the university decision-making bodies (department, faculty, senate level). This paper aims to address the following research questions: to what extent is the participation of ECRs in decision-making bodies ensured, and what are the gender promotion policies within German universities, specifically focusing on a university in the German state of North-Rhine Westphalia? These inquiries are in line with the thematic scope of the special issue dedicated to examining the gendered and intersectional invisibility of researchers, evaluating participation while understanding the intersectional profile of Early Career Researchers (ECRs). The problem statement delves into thematic areas encompassing policies, legal frameworks, and practices, critically analysing their impact on ECR representation within the decision-making structures of the German Higher Education System. The paper utilises a qualitative research approach, conducting a comprehensive thematic content analysis of relevant sources such as websites, institutional documents, and governmental publications. This method aims to provide a detailed

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understanding of the context under study. Initial findings indicate a significant exclusion of PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers from decision-making bodies. However, the implementation of a Gender Equality Plan overseen by federal states has initiated a shift towards achieving more equitable representation within higher education governance structures. The necessity for rectifying under-representation is discussed using a postcolonial intersectional perspective to flag the power relations in academia (Mählck, 2018).

**Keywords:** gender equity plan (GEP), governance, early career researchers (ECRs), decision-making, higher education and research institutions (HERIs)

## **Introduction**

Early career researchers (ECRs) play a crucial role in the academic landscape, contributing fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to the advancement of knowledge and scholarship (Friesenhahn & Beaudry, 2014; Taylor & Keeter, 2010), REF). As emerging scholars, ECRs navigate a complex environment characterised by diverse roles and responsibilities, including teaching, research, and professional development. Despite their widespread presence in academia (Jones, 2014) and diversified contribution (Ballenger, 2010), the extent of their underrepresented involvement in decision-making processes within academic institutions remains a topic of growing interest and concern (Xue et al., 2022).

This paper seeks to explore the participation of ECRs in decision-making bodies within the German context and more specifically the TU University in Dortmund Decision-making bodies, such as faculty councils and committees, are key forums where

institutional policies and initiatives are shaped, making participation in these bodies essential for influencing institutional governance and fostering a sense of ownership among stakeholders. However, the extent to which ECRs are actively engaged in these processes, as well as the barriers and facilitators to their participation, remain under-examined.

Building upon previous research on the challenges and opportunities facing early career researchers (Jamali et al., 2023; Laudel & Gläser, 2007)), the study discussed in this paper investigated factors influencing ECRs participation in decision-making bodies, with special attention to dynamics of institutional governance. The study aimed to identify strategies for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of decision-making processes.

Using qualitative interviews with ECRs from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and institutional contexts, this study explored motivations, barriers, and facilitators shaping their engagement in decision-making bodies.

## **Context**

### *ECRs in Germany*

The definition of the term ‘Early Career Researcher’ in Germany is broad, encompassing various contexts of scientific qualification. Commonly used terms for early career researchers by the federal German Ministry of Education and Research and the State Ministry of Culture and Science in the federal state of North Rhine-

Westphalia (NRW) include "Nachwuchswissenschaftler" or "wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs" (MKW NRW, 2022)), which can be translated as junior researchers. According to the federal Ministry of Education and Research, junior researchers can include PhD students, scientific staff, as well as junior and tenure-track professors. Promotion of ECRs is supported directly or indirectly through policies by both federal and state governments, given the high degree of federalization in German higher education (HE) governance. Programmes supporting ECRs include tenure-track professorships, the 'Pakt für Forschung und Bildung', which supports funding of research organisations like the DFG, collaborative research centres, and graduate schools funded by the 'Exzellenzinitiative' (DFG, 2019)). However, there are no federal or state level policies or laws specifically promoting ECRs in decision-making processes at national and institutional levels, as support primarily focuses on advancing careers and acquiring academic qualifications. The representation of ECRs in university governing bodies varies, with some bodies ensuring their presence while others, such as the rectorate, may lack representation.

### *ECRs at TU Dortmund*

The TU Dortmund employs more than 6,700 people: about 300 professors, 37 junior professors, 2,253 research assistants, 1,466 technical and administrative staff, 2,237 assistants and about 450 lecturers (Gleichstellungsbüro, 2022). The Gender Equality Plan (GEP) records in a gender-differentiated manner how many doctorates/habilitations have been completed. However, it cannot record the number of ECRs because their employment type and

contract duration vary. Some PhD students in the German universities are employed by the university as research assistants while other students are gaining scholarships and therefore are not included in the official numbers of the university as part of their staff. Moreover, it is important to underline that even after the completion of the PhD and during the Habilitation phase the official title of the ECR remains the same and therefore this person is a research assistant.

In some cases, ECRs can apply for the position of Junior Professor, which lasts for 3 years. During that time, the Junior Professors can participate in the faculty board meetings however, the opportunity to be part of the Senate is not given. After they are appointed as professors they can vote as university teachers (Gleichstellungsbüro, 2010).

In the Charter of TU Dortmund (2020), researcher assistants belong to the representatives of the academic staff. Therefore, an academic staff representative is not elected as part of the rectorate. However, five representatives are elected as part of the senate and three ECRs are part of the faculty council. There are two members of the academic staff in the standing committees, which are appointed by the Senate (Charter TU Dortmund, 2020). The representatives in the Senate and the faculty are elected by the rest of the academic staff of the TU Dortmund.

In general, it should be noted that measures to promote ECRs at the University include or focus on the promotion of female ECRs. The most important initiatives to promote female ECRs in their further careers in HE are gender parity in the appointment of junior professors (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022b, p. 16) and gender quotas for "deputy professorships" (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022b, p. 19), which are also prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Science of North Rhine-Westphalia (MKW NRW 2019). The TU Dortmund also tries to attract doctoral students, especially female doctoral students, through career development programmes and numerous qualification and networking programmes, as well as graduate colleagues, which also take the form of workshops, mentoring programmes, job fairs and career forums (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, p. 31).

Furthermore, workshops which centre around the development of ECRs as well as work-contracts which cover the duration of a PhD and ensure a workload of 50% offer incentives for ECRs to pursue a career in science at the TU Dortmund. There is also special funding by the state of NRW which is used to promote and retain recent graduates through the provision of permanent jobs at the TU Dortmund (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, p. 32). The faculty of bio and chemical engineering also supports female ECRs through mentoring programs and the coverage of associated costs (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, p. 33). There are no specific policies mentioned in the GEP of the TU Dortmund which focus on the inclusion of ECRs in decision making processes and university governance.

## *Equality, diversity, and inclusion at TU Dortmund*

According to the state equality act NRW (LGG NRW) which came into effect in 1999 every HEI in NRW must work on and publish an equality plan for the whole organisation and for the respective faculties, the administration and other units of the HEI which has more than 20 employees (SVG NRW §5 Abs. 1). In the chapter concerning gender binary and the diversity of genders, it is worth mentioning that all job advertisements at TU Dortmund University explicitly address all genders for several years (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022).

Some further efforts that have been agreed are those of The TU Dortmund also ensures the entitlement to maternity and paternity leave of its employees and aims to increase the use of open-ended contracts for academic staff to ensure predictability and professional security, of which 50% are held by women (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, pp. 31).

Faculties like mathematics and mechanical engineering recruit young female talent through specific advertisements and involve them in committee work, for example and there is also an extra budget for trainings and conferences numerous faculties which can be requested by female junior scientists (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, p. 31). The faculties are also obliged to agree on a women's quota with the rectorate, which is planned to be a cascade model which has a rate set depending on the rate of female employees in the career level below. The specific quotas are also discussed and to be consulted on faculty council meetings. The

quotes are then sent to the rectorate and are also controlled annually, but there are no sanctions for not meeting the quotas (Gleichstellungsbüro TU Dortmund, 2022, p. 34).

TU Dortmund University is dedicated to actively addressing and preventing discrimination and sexual violence by implementing stringent guidelines to safeguard its researchers. Additionally, it offers educational resources on discrimination and gender-specific violence and provides counselling through equal opportunities officers for those affected. All members and staff are obligated to refrain from discriminatory behaviour and foster a positive work environment, particularly individuals in managerial roles (Technische Universität Dortmund, 2022, pp. 2-4). Should boundaries be breached, TU Dortmund has established a complaints office in line with the AGG, which investigates reported incidents and, if necessary, initiates sanctions or labour law measures under the authority of the Chancellor or Rector (Technische Universität Dortmund, pp. 4-6).

In terms of decision-making involvement, the structure of the German HE system lacks clear departmental levels, with the faculty serving as the initial decision-making body. Within TU Dortmund faculties, representatives are divided into categories, with professors comprising the majority. Middle-level professional representatives, including ECRs such as PhD candidates and postdocs, along with those involved in third-party funded projects, constitute a smaller portion. These representatives may also include professionals with doctoral degrees who have worked at the university for an extended period. Additionally, there are



representatives from non-scientific personnel and bachelor and master's students. Participation in this decision-making body requires election through a procedure conducted every two years.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study draws on Leisyte et al.'s (2013) work on stakeholder theory, and as originally conceptualized by Freeman (1984). Stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). A stakeholder's influence is contingent upon their power, which encompasses the ability to access coercive, utilitarian, or normative means to assert their will (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 865). Additionally, the research will examine legitimacy, characterised as "socially accepted and expected behaviour" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 866), which establishes an actor's authority within the stakeholder network. Furthermore, urgency as part of the stakeholder theory, represents a dynamic component, denoting "the degree to which a stakeholder claims call for immediate attention" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 867).

It is important to mention that stakeholders are individuals or groups that have an interest and are affected by the decisions and actions of the organisation. In the context of academic life, the early career researchers are valid and legitimate stakeholders as their career development and professional growth are influenced by the institutional decision and practices. The elements of power, legitimacy and urgency are going to be in depth examined. That means that in the interviews we look in depth on how and if the

voice of early career researchers is heard and the power that their voice can have within their network.

In stakeholder theory, power refers to the ability of stakeholders to influence or affect the decisions, actions, and outcomes of an organisation. Power dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the relationships between organisations and their stakeholders, as well as in determining the distribution of resources, benefits, and risks (Mitchell et al., 1997). Moreover, legitimacy refers to the perceived appropriateness, acceptability, or justification of an organisation's actions, decisions, and behaviours in the eyes of its stakeholders and broader society. Legitimacy is based on the belief that organisations should operate in accordance with societal norms, values, and expectations, and that their actions should be congruent with prevailing standards of morality, legality, and social responsibility (Mitchell et al., 1997).

Additionally, urgency is a critical concept that represents the degree to which a stakeholder claims immediate attention or action from the organisation. Urgency is influenced by factors such as the timing and nature of the stakeholder's demands or concerns, as well as the potential consequences of not addressing them promptly. Stakeholders may assert urgency based on various factors, including time sensitivity, the magnitude of the issue, or the perceived importance of their interests. By framing their concerns as urgent, stakeholders may seek to compel the organisation to allocate resources, adjust priorities, or expedite decision-making processes in their favour. Thus, urgency not only reflects the timing and severity of stakeholder demands but also

serves as a strategic tool for exerting influence within the stakeholder network (Mitchell et al., 1997).

Drawing on stakeholder theory as conceptualized by Freeman (1984) and further developed by Mitchell et al. (1997), a postcolonial perspective in higher education institutions influenced this theory in several key ways. Firstly, a postcolonial perspective broadened the definition of stakeholders to ensure it includes marginalized groups such as international students and students with a migration background. This inclusive approach ensured that the voices of those affected by colonial legacies are heard and considered in institutional decisions (Adefila et al., 2022). Moreover, the postcolonial analysis critically examined how power is distributed among stakeholders. It highlighted how certain stakeholders, often from historically privileged backgrounds, have disproportionate access to the decision-making bodies, thereby perpetuating existing inequalities (Nalbantoğlu, 2017).

Secondly, the concept of legitimacy is re-evaluated within a postcolonial framework. Legitimacy is not just about conforming to "socially accepted and expected behaviour" within the existing dominant framework. It involves questioning whose norms and values are being upheld and recognizing alternative forms of legitimacy rooted in non-Western, indigenous, and marginalized cultural contexts (Åkerlind, 2005). This perspective advocates for the recognition and inclusion of diverse epistemologies and cultural practices as legitimate, potentially shifting the traditional

perceptions of authority within the stakeholder network to be more inclusive of these perspectives.

## **Methods**

In this study, the research team carried out a one-time semi-structured interview between May 2023 to November 2023 with 10 ECRs based at TU Dortmund. The interviews aimed to gather insights into the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of participants regarding their involvement in the decision-making bodies. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data.

The research design of the study has been reviewed and approved by the leaders of the Work Group of the VOICES project and the Research Task Force of the Work Group. Moreover, all the interviewees signed a consent form which ensures their anonymity. The interviewees comprised ECRs with varied involvement in University decision-making bodies. Out of the 10 interviewees, eight were pursuing their PhD and the remaining two engaged in postdoc research. The researchers had a diverse background of humanities, business and economics and engineering. At the time of data collection, five of the ECRs were participating in decision-making bodies, while the other five didn't (and had never done). To enhance diversity and inclusion, the sample included both German and non-German researchers; seven participants were female and three were male.

## Results

A clear definition of what constitutes an ECRs proved elusive, with varied perspectives on who qualifies for this designation. Some regarded ECRs solely as those pursuing their PhD, while others considered individuals who had recently obtained a professorship as falling within this category. This ambiguity extended to the German term used, which encompassed a broader range of researchers.

The primary challenge faced by ECRs centred on the precariousness of their employment contracts, which may offer stability for a limited duration. Support for these individuals is provided by the Graduate Centre, which facilitates opportunities for researchers with and without a PhD. As ECRs, their primary responsibilities comprised teaching, research, and involvement in third-funded projects, as delineated by their employment contracts. Both PhD students and postdocs typically grappled with substantial workloads, often without commensurate financial compensation. A significant distinction lay in whether the contract was directly affiliated with the professorship to which the PhD student was attached. In such cases, teaching obligations were typically integrated into the contract, alongside dedicated time for research activities. Similarly, postdocs had distinct responsibilities, with provisions for individualised time allocations for research pursuits.

A precise workload distribution among the researchers proved challenging to establish. It became apparent that, for some PhD

candidates, completing their dissertations was their foremost priority; however, conflicting obligations frequently complicated dissertation work. postdocs faced similar challenges in this regard. They had to work on their research papers, teach and supervise PhD students.

The motivation driving ECRs to pursue an academic career varied, with conflicting perspectives emerging. Some viewed pursuing further education as the logical progression immediately following their Master's degree, while others regarded it as the next step in their career trajectory after gaining practical work experience.

As regards, representation on decision-making bodies, gender did not emerge as a factor influencing participation in decision-making processes, as reported by the interviewees. Participation in these elections emerged as typically low, with individuals discussing among themselves who would be most suitable for representation. Whilst PhD students and postdocs stated they would be encouraged by their professors to participate in the election process to represent ECRs in committees, those in decision-making bodies emphasised their close relationship with professors, noting that they often felt unable to oppose their professors' positions due to employment connections and potential repercussions. Discussion agendas are set in advance, allowing participants to prepare accordingly. Yet, ECRs expressed feeling their voices were overshadowed by those of professors. Notwithstanding the expectation to voice their opinions on various topics, they also strived to avoid conflicts. Although professors initiate their involvement, and ECRs may have their voices heard on matters

related to their employment, final decisions rest with the professors.

Conversely, those who did not participate in decision-making bodies cited their busy schedules, which encompassed teaching, research, and project commitments. Many expressed a lack of awareness regarding the election processes for committee members. PhD students expressed that such involvement would detract from their primary research focus and opted to abstain. Postdocs faced significant workloads, including supervising PhD students, teaching, administrative duties, and proposal writing for national and European projects. Additionally, they applied for research projects aligned with their interests. While PhD students occasionally participated in application development, their involvement was sporadic, with professors making final decisions on responsibilities.

Despite closer relationships between postdocs and professors, committee work ranked low on their list of priorities due to competing obligations.

International ECRs encountered language barriers, as much of the work was conducted in German, hindering their understanding and involvement. They felt their voices were not heard within their respective professorships, diminishing the need for further engagement.

Then the last part was of the interviews examined further the topic what are the key factors that are essential for the successful career progression of the ECRs to acquire a full academic position. On this part the responses of the early career researchers were various, but the following points could be agreed. The networking opportunities were mentioned as one of the most important aspects. The ECRs thought of great importance the chance to establish collaborations and enhance their visibility in the academic field with their active participation in conferences, seminars, and other networking events as part of the national and European projects. It is important to connect not only with other professors but also with other like-minded professionals of the field. Then it was specified as important to have access to research funding opportunities in a national and European context. It was often underlined that students didn't have the experience of drafting a proposal and applying. Then mentorship and supervision were also voiced as important. The mentoring and the supervision could happen not only from the supervisor but also from the graduate centre or other facilities. Early Career Researchers often felt that they lacked support so as them to be competitive within the academic job market.

Overall, the results of the interviews with early career researchers (ECRs) revealed several key insights. Participants described their current positions and work roles within their respective universities, highlighting the division of their work in terms of working hours. Motivation for pursuing a career in academia varied among participants, with some expressing interest in research and teaching opportunities. Participants also discussed their



institutions' support for ECRs, noting both positive initiatives and key challenges faced by this demographic. In terms of representation in decision-making committees, some participants reported involvement in various committees within their institutions, detailing their roles and responsibilities. However, concerns were raised regarding the extent to which ECRs' voices are considered in faculty boards and decision-making processes. Despite this, participants identified areas where ECRs can have a significant impact, such as advocating for issues relevant to their demographic and influencing institutional decisions. Suggestions for improvement included enhancing communication and transparency in decision-making processes and providing more opportunities for ECRs to contribute and be heard. Finally, participants identified key factors essential for the successful career progression of ECRs to full permanent academic positions in their country, including access to research funding, effective supervision, and supportive institutional environments.

## **Discussion**

The results presented on the engagement of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in institutional decision-making processes provide a nuanced elaboration on stakeholder theory when viewed through a postcolonial lens. The findings highlight both challenges and opportunities that resonate with key principles of both frameworks, leading to several important insights.

Stakeholder theory, as conceptualized by Freeman (1984) and elaborated by Mitchell et al. (1997), emphasizes the influence and

legitimacy of stakeholders within an organization. However, the results indicate that many ECRs lack awareness of the mechanisms for participating in decision-making bodies. This lack of awareness undermines their potential influence and diminishes their legitimacy as stakeholders. The perceived exclusivity and privileging of certain individuals by professors further alienates ECRs, leading to social disengagement. This finding suggests that stakeholder theory needs to more explicitly account for the barriers that limit stakeholder participation and influence, particularly among less empowered groups.

Moreover, the significant time constraints faced by ECRs, due to their multifaceted roles in teaching, research, and administrative duties, result in a reduced prioritization of involvement in decision-making bodies. This aspect nuances stakeholder theory by highlighting the practical limitations that impede stakeholder engagement, which are not merely issues of access or awareness but also of competing responsibilities.

International ECRs facing language barriers further complicates the straightforward application of stakeholder theory. The ability to engage effectively in institutional processes is hindered when communication is conducted in a non-native language, impacting their influence and participation. This insight suggests that stakeholder theory should consider linguistic inclusivity as a critical factor in stakeholder engagement and legitimacy.

A postcolonial perspective emphasizes the need to dismantle colonial legacies and promote inclusivity. The exclusion of ECRs

from decision-making processes reflects ongoing power imbalances and systemic inequities that postcolonial theory seeks to address. The perception that involvement opportunities are reserved for privileged individuals underscores the need for more equitable and inclusive institutional practices.

The study's findings of bottom-up advocacy for more active roles for elected representatives and improved communication channels align with postcolonial objectives of empowering marginalised voices and enhancing transparency. These initiatives aim to democratise institutional governance, reflecting a postcolonial commitment to equity and justice.

The suggestion to establish separate boards tailored to the interests of PhD students and postdocs addresses the specific needs and concerns of these groups, resonating with the postcolonial emphasis on recognizing and valuing diverse experiences and knowledge systems. This approach ensures that the unique challenges faced by ECRs are acknowledged and addressed within institutional frameworks.

Combining stakeholder theory with postcolonial literature provides a richer framework for understanding and addressing the complexities of institutional governance. The barriers to ECR participation highlight the need to re-evaluate the power dynamics and structural inequalities inherent in traditional stakeholder models. By integrating postcolonial insights, institutions can move towards more inclusive and equitable governance structures that genuinely reflect the diversity of their stakeholders.

The advocacy for improved communication channels and the publication of meeting minutes is a practical step towards greater transparency and inclusivity. This aligns with both stakeholder theory's emphasis on legitimacy and postcolonial theory's call for dismantling opaque, exclusionary practices.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The study was limited in size, institutional context, and the dataset dependent on ECRs' perceptions, thus vulnerable to bias or inaccuracies based on individuals' perceptions or interpretations of their experiences. This limits the findings' external validity. Additionally, language barriers limited non-German speakers' access to institutional documents concerning the issues under study published in German.

Notwithstanding, the study shed light on the specifics of precarious experiences by participating ECRs, power dynamics with professors, and how these intersect with their perceptions of decision-making bodies, and their motivations to (not) be involved in such bodies. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to critically examine and reform their governance structures through the lenses of stakeholder theory and postcolonial literature. By addressing the barriers to ECR participation, promoting inclusive and transparent practices, and recognizing the diverse needs of their academic community, institutions can enhance their legitimacy and foster a more equitable environment. Integrating postcolonial insights into stakeholder theory provides a comprehensive framework for

understanding and addressing the complexities of stakeholder engagement and institutional governance in higher education.

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