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# INVITATION TO AN ONLINE COFFEE! EXPLORING HOW INFORMAL ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES SUPPORT EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS' PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND WELL-BEING

VESNA HOLUBEK AND HENNA JUUSOLA

Tampere University, Finland

### ABSTRACT

*Our chapter explores the benefits of informal academic communities by focusing on the Finland-based early career higher education researchers' network (ECRN). Established two years ago, the ECRN primarily operates through monthly online coffee meetings. Via dialogical reflections by the authors and a qualitative inquiry into the ECRN, we explore the ECRN's role in its members' professional growth and well-being. We provide a narrative vignette of an imagined online coffee meeting to illustrate the significant peer-learning conversations in the ECRN. Based on our dialogical approach, we conclude that the ECRN is*

*beneficial for its members' professional growth and well-being as it provides peer support, information sharing, scholarly support and higher education research-related support. Hence, we call for academia to better recognise and support informal academic communities as they have the potential to nourish a more collaborative working culture in academia.*

**Keywords:** Early career researchers; Finland; informal academic community; network; online meetings; professional growth; well-being

## INTRODUCTION

Career building in academia is not a straightforward path. During their doctoral studies and in the years after obtaining their doctorate, the early career researcher's (ECR's) path is characterised by precarity, professional uncertainty and demands for effectiveness within the dominant discourse of publish or perish (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). Following the sociocultural approaches to learning, we see supportive social interactions within communities to be crucial for an ECR who navigates the complexities of academia.

In this chapter, we explore how informal academic communities may benefit ECRs' professional growth and well-being by focusing on the Finland-based early career higher education researchers' network (ECRN).<sup>1</sup> The ECRN

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<sup>1</sup> Higher education research refers to a field of study that focuses on researching various aspects of higher education. Often drawing on different disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches, higher education researchers explore topics such as teaching and learning in higher education, student experiences, academic careers, management and administration in higher education institutions, internationalisation of higher education and higher education systems and policies (for example, see Tight, 2018).

gathers approximately 40 ECRs of various aspects of Finnish higher education (HE), including doctoral and postdoctoral researchers affiliated with Finnish universities and members in different research and development (R&D) positions outside academia. In Finland, some doctoral researchers have secured full-time employment outside academia and do their PhD studies part-time. The ECRN was established in spring 2021, when universities transitioned to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was a need to build connections with HE researchers across different disciplines and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Finland. The ECRN operates through monthly online coffee meetings arranged by one or two members. These informal gatherings usually do not have specific themes; rather, members are invited to discuss their (research) interests or concerns. There have occasionally been short presentations given by members, seminar-type events or meetings about conference presentation proposals.

The ECRN is a self-organised group without formal membership or institutional structure. Even the name 'ECRN' is loosely used in our internal communication. Invitations to join the ECRN are occasionally announced by scholarly societies and research units in Finland, with which members are familiar. Anyone who is interested and considers themselves a 'Finland-based early career HE researcher' is welcome to join, and there are no membership fees. In practice, the ECRN is a mailing list that is maintained by active members. We (Vesna and Henna) have been active members of the ECRN since its establishment, and Henna has taken the lead in arranging regular online meetings for the last two years with Vesna's support.

The main goal of this chapter is to illustrate how informal academic communities, as important peer-interaction forums, support individual professional growth and well-being. We explore the ECRN community as a valuable forum for sharing

knowledge on how to navigate different formal and hidden aspects of academia. The next section outlines the analytical approach that informs our thinking and our dialogical approach to the topic. Then, we present a vignette, an illustrative story of an imagined online coffee meeting. Our reflection on the vignette is outlined in the discussion section, followed by the conclusion.

### THE ROLE OF INFORMAL ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES IN PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND WELL-BEING

Previous studies have documented the recent developments in the Finnish HE system towards performance-based operations and their impact on the academic profession (e.g. [Siekkinen et al., 2020](#)). Career paths among Finnish ECRs are characterised by increased competition, casualisation of contracts, uncertain career prospects and increasing work ill-being ([Aarnikoivu et al., 2019](#); [Pyhältö et al., 2023](#); [Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017](#)). The sharpened polarisation between ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in the academic profession ([Ylijoki & Ursin, 2015](#)) renders ECRs particularly vulnerable as they are constantly competing for university positions and external research funding. For example, a recent study on the Finnish university sector showed that a staggering 80.5% of those in career stage 2 (postdoctoral researchers) had fixed-term employment in 2020 ([Kallio & Kallio, 2023](#)).

In this context of increased competition in academia, it is important to recognise the value of community in individual professional growth. [Wenger’s \(1998\)](#) work on communities of practice highlights the social dimension of learning, also in professional development. Indeed, there is a growing literature on the ways in which peer groups and collegiality support professional growth, particularly among doctoral researchers

(e.g. Buissink-Smith et al., 2013; Dytham, 2019; several chapters in this volume). These studies show that peer learning happens in the interplay between structured and emergent interactions (Dytham, 2019), which facilitates progress and positive doctorate experience (Buissink-Smith et al., 2013). Both pre- and postdoctoral phases are characterised by a similar kind of academic precarity (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017); however, the postdoctoral phase of academic careers has been less researched (Nieminen & Ruttenberg-Rozen, in this volume). Notably, the ECRN community that we explore includes doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, which enables peer learning across different early stages of an academic career.

We approach the ECRN as an informal academic community of peers compared to the more formalised groups to which ECRs (and ECRN members) might belong, such as research or project groups or doctoral seminar groups. Informal communities provide important backstage spaces for ‘significant conversations’ about academic work (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). Significant conversations can be defined as sincere social interactions in which individuals share their professional experiences, test ideas and solve problems, thus making sense of their professional lives (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). These sincere and often personal conversations enable safe spaces for peer learning as individuals try to make sense of their professional paths.

We argue that informal academic communities are important forums for sharing explicit and tacit knowledge on becoming and being an academic. In other words, significant conversations in an informal community may enable its members to access the hidden rules of academic environments. According to Holste and Fields (2010), tacit knowledge encompasses informal, practical know-how, values and beliefs exchanged through direct interaction, learning communities and storytelling. Similarly, explicit knowledge indicates formal, easily articulated,

impersonal knowledge (Holste & Fields, 2010). The aspects of academia that we call tacit, implicit or hidden are informal channels of genuine learning happening outside formal events, those meaningful ‘watercooler’ conversations about the unofficial rules of academia.

In our inquiry on how ECRN members experience the community’s role in their professional growth, we use a dialogical reflections approach (Ab Rashid, 2018), i.e. reflecting through conversation with peers. Using dialogical reflections enabled us to interlink the authors’ experiences, the qualitative empirical inquiry and theoretical perspectives. Thus, the data for our inquiry include a series of discussions between ourselves and other ECRN members, topics discussed during the ECRN meetings, the members’ experiences that we collected through an anonymous qualitative survey and our own reflections on these conversations, meetings and survey responses.

To illustrate the significant conversations in the ECRN online coffee meetings, we use narrative storytelling, a descriptive textual vignette that presents ‘fictional, simulated or actual situations’ (Kandemir & Budd, 2018, p. 2). As we have designed the vignette in the form of an imagined online coffee meeting, the following section is not a transcription of a real meeting. The presented themes in the vignette are a synthesis drawn from our dialogical reflections.

#### SIGNIFICANT CONVERSATIONS DURING AN (IMAGINED) ONLINE COFFEE MEETING

Place: an online meeting platform

Time: sometime in 2022

Participants (composite characters with fictional names): six ECRN members from different Finnish universities: Nina,

Samuel and Maria are doctoral researchers in different stages of their doctoral journey, whereas Emilia, Oliver and Lea have completed their PhD and are working on different short-term contracts.

*Emilia: Hi, I hope you all are doing well today! Or at least better than I am. I just received a rejection of my one-year grant application and have no idea what I'm going to do next year. I didn't even plan to join this meeting, but then I thought that I might feel better after having a coffee with you instead of sitting alone, worrying about the future. – Ah, this constant chase for funding seems to be a never-ending story...*

*Nina: Oh, sorry to hear that! The grant competition is tough, and it's frustrating to keep modifying the application to match the priorities of each foundation. I don't know, Emilia, if something like this will interest you, but have you noticed the part-time researcher position currently open in our faculty? I can send you the link in the chat. It's only part-time for a year, but I heard that there might be a possibility to extend the contract after that. [Nina posts the link in the chat.]*

*Oliver: I saw that job announcement. I think it's worth trying, even though it's only for one year, but you never know. Also, I recently attended a grant-writing workshop organised by a foundation. They gave some useful tips. The slides are available on their website. I'll send a link in the chat, if Emilia, or others here, want to check them. [Oliver posts the link in the chat.]*

*Emilia: Thank you for the links!*

*Samuel: Yes, thanks for sharing the links! I was planning to apply for that grant next year, so I'm sure those slides will be helpful. I haven't applied for any grants before, and it's good to know that such workshops exist. What is your experience, Emilia? Is the application process time-consuming?*

*Emilia: Well, it took me longer to write my research plan, because I haven't used that methodology before, and at the same time, I needed to finalise my current project. And now it feels so*

*disappointing, like I wasted my time, because I won't be able to conduct the study without that funding. I'm sorry everyone, I didn't mean to spread my negative feelings here...*

*[Nina posts a heart emoticon in the chat.]*

*Nina: Hey, no worries! Feel free to express those feelings here, we understand your frustration. And maybe you'll feel better if you vent about it. I know venting worked for me when I got my application rejected last year. And my next application was successful, so you never know!*

*Samuel: It's really useful to hear about your experiences. I'm thinking, could we organise a coffee meeting on the topic of grant applications? We could share experiences and tips. It's easier for me to ask you guys about details I don't understand. I don't feel so comfortable asking my supervisors; they are always so busy.*

*Emilia: That would be great! We could even read each other's applications and give feedback on what's unclear. I would benefit from such feedback.*

*Maria: I would be interested in joining that meeting! Although, it's quite discouraging to hear about how difficult it is to get a grant. And being on a grant is different from employment because you don't have occupational healthcare and other employment protections. In fact, I read a study, a large national survey that showed that almost 70% of doctoral researchers in Finland received some grant during their PhD studies. So many PhD researchers need to rely on those small grants. I wonder: are grants enough for living, you know, paying the bills? Suddenly, I feel very lucky to have a longer contract in my supervisor's project.*

*Nina: I read that study too, from last year, right? I found it surprising – or rather crazy – that around 30% of early-career researchers with a PhD have become unemployed at some point after getting their doctorate. I don't know, do I even want to stay in academia after I finish my doctorate? People graduating from my faculty mostly go and work in industry – better working conditions there.*



*Oliver: It's great if one can choose whether to stay or leave academia. I feel that doing research and teaching at a university has always been my dream job, hahaha! I've been interested in HE research since my bachelor's, and I worked in several universities here and abroad. These were short-term jobs, but I still find the work meaningful. And as you might know, my current research examines academic precarity, so maybe that's why I feel I can cope with my own career precarity...*

*Maria: Ah, this is interesting Oliver! You are living what you are researching. I guess many of us here are doing that in some way. I never thought about it.*

*[Lea joins the online meeting.]*

*Lea: Hi everyone! Sorry I'm late, I had another meeting. But I think it's okay to join, even if late, right?*

*Emilia: Yes, you are welcome whenever you can participate. No pressure!*

*Lea: Ah, good, thanks! I joined only once before and had the impression that we can just come and go as our time allows. Actually, I really value these kinds of gatherings, where one can just show up as they are, without any big agendas or preparations. Just like sitting down for a coffee. So, what have you been talking about?*

*Maria: You know, the usual – grants, jobs, career hopes. Oliver was just talking about his research – he's sort-of researching his own career precarity, right, Oliver?*

*Oliver: Yes, my article just came out. I'll share it in the chat. We were commenting how as HE researchers, we often research what we live, things around our workplaces.*

*Lea: Hmm, interesting. I don't know if I'm really an HE researcher. . . My topic is interdisciplinary; the theories I use are strongly related to my discipline, but then the focus is HE, so I don't know. And my research group doesn't do any HE research.*

*Nina: I know how you feel! My situation with supervisors is very similar. They don't exactly focus on HE either. But one of them told me*

*about this network. I must say, I enjoy these meetings! Academia can be a harsh place, but there is a lot of kindness here.*

*Oliver: I agree, Nina! Besides, HE research is an interdisciplinary field, it's common that researchers use approaches from different disciplines. And I remember that in the previous meetings, there were people also wondering whether they are actually HE researchers. I guess, this is not so uncommon, especially if your research group focuses on a particular discipline or for those who don't belong to any research group.*

*Lea: Ah, good to hear that I'm not the only one confused about this! I guess I'm a newcomer to the field, hehe!*

*Samuel: I wonder, are there some useful articles about the history of the field, common topics and approaches – something like that? Do you know, Oliver?*

*Oliver: Yes, there are some good articles. I'll find and share them. [Oliver posts several links in the chat.] But I need to go now, my next meeting starts soon... Can we maybe agree about the next coffee meeting?*

*[They agree on the date of the next meeting. Some of them leave the meeting while others linger and discuss academic writing, publication channels, upcoming conferences, joint projects, etc.]*

## DISCUSSION: ONLINE COFFEE MEETINGS—MORE THAN JUST COFFEE

As we illustrated in the vignette, the ECRN is not only an important community that provides social and professional support but also a forum to share tacit and explicit knowledge. More specifically, we identified four interrelated aspects of ECRN's support: peer support, information sharing, scholarly support and HE research-related support.

By peer support, we refer to the idea of belonging to a community as being important in itself. Peer community is especially relevant for individuals who do not otherwise belong to any research group, or if they do, the group might not focus on HE research. Emotional well-being is another valuable feature of this peer support. As mentioned in the vignette, many EC researchers experience academia as a harsh, competitive environment. Thus, the atmosphere of kindness nurtured in this network can alleviate stress and professional ill-being. The possibility of flexible participation can also decrease the ‘pressure to perform’, as members can simply pull up a proverbial chair and engage with the community as their time allows.

This informal community also plays a significant role in sharing tips, information and (formal) knowledge such as reading material, job announcements, funding calls and conference announcements. Moreover, sharing information among HE scholars at different EC stages enables learning about events and sources particularly relevant to the HE research field.

As a scholarly network, the ECRN fosters learning of the many aspects of academic work – for example, how to apply for funding, publish articles, find collaborators or prepare teaching sessions. Many of these aspects could be characterised as tacit knowledge and skills that are often learned through experience and trial/error. The ECRN also enables scholarly networking as it bridges not only various career stages but also academic and non-academic work. Namely, many members are pursuing their doctorate part-time while having full-time employment elsewhere. Additionally, some members who completed their PhD are not affiliated with Finnish universities but work in universities abroad or in R&D roles. The network strengthens their connection to the (Finnish) academic community and the HE research field.

The ECRN creates an important space for building the identity of an HE researcher, as it gathers researchers who are scattered across different disciplines and universities. The ECRN also advances HE as an independent but interdisciplinary research field. The network members learn from each other about classic and new literature, history of the field and relevant research strands and publication channels. Furthermore, the ECRN may generate new research questions and future initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrated how an informal academic community, such as the ECRN, supports the professional growth and well-being of its members. While we acknowledge the value of formal communities, our aim is to emphasise the importance of these less recognised, informal spaces of learning how to navigate the complexities of academia.

The informal nature of such communities has its advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, informality allows flexibility of participation while, on the other hand, it poses the question of a community's continuity. This dilemma was also discussed in the ECRN: whether to keep the ECRN informal with flexible engagement or to join some larger scholarly society who could provide resources, support and more secure continuity in the future. The ECRN's existence depends on the time and effort of several people. We recognise this as the main challenge of informal communities and argue that the support of HEIs is crucial, for example, ensuring time and space resources, access to physical and online facilities and funding, as well as recognising communal efforts as a merit in academic promotion. Informal communities should be recognised and supported in academia as

they have a great potential to enhance individual contentment and foster a more collaborative academic culture.

Despite the challenges that informal academic communities might face, this chapter has outlined many important positive effects, such as enhanced professional well-being and peer support. Therefore, we invite academics, particularly ECRs, to engage in existing informal communities that they find meaningful but also to initiate new communities with their colleagues. Sometimes, these communities might be short-lived, but based on our experiences, the kindness they potentially spread makes the efforts worthwhile.

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