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**To cite this article:** Flora Petrik, Franziska Lessky, Sabine Weiß, Larissa Bartok & Magdalena Fellner (03 Mar 2026): Finding their way: becoming a researcher in higher education studies, Higher Education Research & Development, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2026.2634267](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2634267)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2634267>



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Published online: 03 Mar 2026.



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## Finding their way: becoming a researcher in higher education studies

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the career pathways and identity formation of early career researchers (ECRs) within higher education (HE) studies. We understand HE studies as a field of study in which HE is the object of the research. Addressing a significant gap in existing literature, our study investigates how individuals become researchers in HE studies and how social contexts shape their professional identities. Through a qualitative, biographical approach, twelve in-depth interviews with Austrian ECRs were conducted and analysed using hermeneutic and coding methods. By understanding ECRs' trajectories from the theoretical perspective of communities of practice (CoP), this study sheds light on the dynamic interplay between the academic environment in the field of HE studies and the individuals' biographical experiences. The analysis identifies four CoPs that particularly shape ECRs' integration into HE studies and their identification as HE researchers: (1) undergraduate and graduate studies prior to the PhD, (2) the workplace, (3) research activities and (4) scientific networks. The results underscore the importance of addressing the barriers faced by those outside established academic networks and considering broader biographical factors that influence integration into HE research.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 November 2024  
Accepted 3 February 2026

### KEYWORDS

academic identity; early career researchers; higher education; professional development; doctoral education

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable focus on the career paths of early career researchers (ECR) as they navigate their entry into and pathway through academia (Liu & Lin, 2024; Spence et al., 2024; Zhang & Gong, 2024). Yet, there is limited knowledge about ECRs specifically within the field of higher education (HE) research (Thaler et al., 2023). Whether HE studies can be conceptualised as a 'field of study' or 'discipline' has been under scholarly debate for more than 50 years (Tight, 2020). We understand

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all research activities that investigate topics related to the HE sector (e.g., research on university students' experiences, institutional change or working conditions of academics) as part of HE studies.

Given the continuous expansion of the field of HE studies (Tight, 2012), which has become an increasingly influential player in the development and management of HE institutions (Schneijderberg et al., 2011), it is a pressing concern to investigate how researchers find their way into HE studies. Understanding academic socialisation processes and career pathways is crucial for the professionalisation of the field and for informing more coherent career development and planning. A nuanced account of these trajectories can support the development of targeted institutional support structures for early-career researchers and contribute to strengthening higher education research as a basis for empirically grounded reflection and decision-making in higher education policy, governance, and development.

We address this gap by asking: *How does one become a researcher in higher education studies? How do social contexts shape the processes of identifying as a researcher in higher education studies and contribute to the integration into the field?* To answer these questions, we draw on an in-depth qualitative, biographically oriented study. From 2022 to 2024, twelve interviews were conducted with ECRs in Austria and analysed by a hermeneutic approach (Froschauer & Lueger, 2020). We define ECRs as individuals who are either currently enrolled in a doctoral programme or have obtained their PhD within the past five years, in line with common definitions in the literature (Teixeira da Silva, 2021). This group is of particular interest due to the field's relatively low level of institutionalisation, its multi- and interdisciplinary nature and the lack of clear academic career pathways, which makes the early stages of becoming an HE researcher especially formative and precarious.

HE studies amalgamates diverse disciplines and encompasses researchers from various study programmes and backgrounds with miscellaneous work experiences. The Austrian context in which the empirical data was produced adds an intriguing dimension to the discussion: There is a particular low level of institutionalisation of HE studies, and to date, no (under-)graduate programme is explicitly dedicated to HE research. The extent to which a research field is institutionalised and the degree to which scholars feel they belong to it are central to the power and influence of a discipline within its academic field (Schneijderberg et al., 2011). Consequently, it remains a highly relevant question whether researchers predominantly identify themselves as HE researchers or rather position themselves in the traditional disciplines (e.g., sociology, economy, political sciences).

In the next section, we elucidate the specifics of the field of HE studies and outline the particularities of Austrian HE research. By doing so, we highlight what sets the Austrian case apart from other country-specific pathways and underscore the potential relevance of our results beyond national borders. We then delve into the current state of research and review relevant findings on ECRs' identities and socialisation processes. Afterwards, we outline our theoretical premises, specifically adopting the concept of 'communities of practice' (CoP) as presented by Lave and Wenger (1991/2008). Building upon this framework, we describe the methodology, data, sampling strategy and approach to analysing the data. Following this, we illustrate the reconstructed CoPs that emerged from the data analysis and reconstruct how they interact with one another. Finally, our findings are critically discussed and contextualised, and wider implications for research and practice explored.

## Background: the emergence of higher education studies

In Europe, HE research did not emerge as a field until the 1980s. This development is situated within a broader historical context, in which the rise of New Public Management has contributed to the gradual emergence and normalisation of HE research as a field, often embedded in administrative or policy-oriented units (Maassen & Pausits, 2013). The evolution of HE studies in Austria is closely linked to the reform cycles within the national HE system: The reforms of the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s were accompanied, commented upon, and analysed from the perspective of research. In contrast to other countries, HE research in Austria did not initially operate within formalised structures such as research centres. Rather, individual researchers conducted studies in relation to the HE system (Fischer & Strasser, 1973). It was not until the 1990s that the institutionalisation of HE research, along with a corresponding number of researchers within specific universities and research institutions, commenced (Pausits et al., 2023).

There are still numerous challenges in establishing this research field. Firstly, compared to the Anglo-American context, German-speaking countries are less open to appointing professors without adherence to established disciplines (Schneijderberg et al., 2011). It is consequently not surprising that the institutional foundation of HE research exhibits a higher degree of fragmentation (Schwarz & Teichler, 2000).

Secondly, while the US offers numerous HE study programs, in Europe, such programmes have emerged more recently and tend to have an emphasis on management-related topics (Maassen & Pausits, 2013). Most European HE management programs aim to prepare professionals for administrative roles rather than research. Consequently, aspiring researchers frequently train under individual supervisors, often within the framework of junior research assistant positions funded by third-party research projects. This lack of stable institutional support, combined with uncertain career prospects, causes many promising researchers to leave the field (Kehm, 2015).

Given the relatively young age of HE studies globally and the comparatively low level of institutional foundation in Austria, questions about the academic socialisation processes arise. Against this background, it seems of pressing interest for HE research and development to gain a deeper understanding of how researchers' career pathways unfold and how academic identities are constructed within the field. Even though this study is situated within a specific national context, the lived experiences of the interviewed ECRs reflect patterns of socialisation processes within the field and can thus be utilised to formulate wider implications for HE development.

## Literature review: early career researchers' identities and socialisation processes

Processes of becoming an academic include identity development and biographical changes compelled by doctoral study and the pre-tenure period (Coryell et al., 2013). Pursuing a doctorate can be a challenging emotional and intellectual process (Monereo & Liesa, 2022; Teixeira da Silva, 2021), often characterised by the emergence of an academic role identity, which is crucial to professional success (Callagher et al., 2021; McAlpine et al., 2014). Research on ECRs' identities aims to explore academic identity-building practices

and the different types of orientations (Charteris et al., 2016) as well as ‘gatekeepers’ (Enright & Facer, 2017) that guide emerging scholars in navigating through academia.

Aside from the challenging nature of the PhD experience in general, the neoliberal restructuring of academia, most notably the rise of New Public Management, the marketisation of HE and the increasing precarity of working conditions, have impacted on how becoming and being an academic are constructed (Angervall & Gustafsson, 2014; Bansel, 2011; Brooks et al., 2017). Recent research has shown that the specific fields mediate whether researchers are able to build strong identification with the academic profession (Cidlinska et al., 2023). HE research shows some specificities: it is a multidisciplinary, non-traditional discipline, engaging researchers from across academia and administrative units of universities and colleges (Tight, 2012).

To conclude, although studies illustrate the importance of developing an academic identity, participating in networks, experiencing belonging, having support of ‘gatekeepers’ and acquiring legitimate forms of capital to sustain an academic career, little is known about ECRs in the field of HE research.

## Theoretical considerations

Drawing on the theoretical framework of ‘communities of practice’ (CoP) developed by Lave and Wenger (1991/2008), we examine how participation in an interdisciplinary research community contributes to ECRs’ integration into the field. By understanding the dynamics of *becoming a HE researcher*, we gain valuable insights into the socialisation, learning and identity formation processes of HE researchers (Mantai, 2019). In a field that remains weakly institutionalised yet increasingly influential in shaping higher education policy and institutional decision-making, examining these dynamics is central to understanding who is able to enter higher education research, how particular forms of expertise are legitimised, and under what conditions sustained research trajectories become possible.

Lave and Wenger (1991/2008) conceptualise CoP as groups of individuals who develop a shared repertoire of knowledge and practices that inform the way actors engage in their work and learning processes. Participation in CoP shapes the development of *becoming* in nuanced ways. First, through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 2002), individuals gradually move from the periphery to the core of the community, leading to processes of *becoming with(in)* a community. Second, participation in CoP facilitates the construction of professional identities. Academic identity can thus be understood as ‘a function of community membership’ (Henkel, 2005, p. 172). Scholars engage in identity work as they negotiate their roles, collaborate with peers, develop expertise and deal with the norms, values and shared practices of the community (Masika & Jones, 2016). Drawing upon this conceptual framework, our focus shifts from understanding paths to academia as individual ‘rational choices’ to the social fabric of these processes.

## Methodology and material

To gain in-depth insights into the perspectives of HE researchers and the contexts shaping their careers, we employed a qualitative approach, specifically narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008).

## Sample

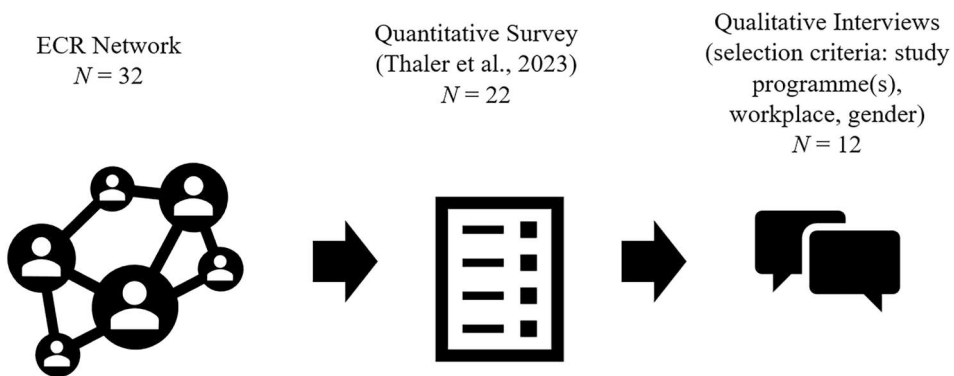
The study participants were recruited from an academic network of ECRs in HE in Austria established in 2019, comprising 32 members at the time of data collection (Thaler et al., 2023). Using a network as a starting point for sampling (Brooks et al., 2017) ensured that participants were positioning themselves within the field of HE research. On the basis of a previously conducted questionnaire (Thaler et al., 2023), 12 study participants were selected for our in-depth qualitative interview study, based on maximum variation in characteristics such as employment and previous education, resulting in a diverse sample (Figure 1).

The participants stem from a diverse range of study programmes, including Sociology, Psychology, Economics, Political Science, Educational Science, Business Administration, Business and Management, Marketing Management, Statistics, Socioeconomics, Sports Science, and Primary School Education, as well as interdisciplinary programmes such as Business Education and an international Master's programme Research in Higher Education. In total, three of the 12 participants (7 women, 5 men) were employed as PhDs in HE institutions, three obtained jobs as researchers in third-party funded projects, four worked as administrative staff at their universities and two worked in public institutions (Table 1).

## Method

The interviews followed an explorative approach, which was orientated towards the relevancies and experiences of the interviewees and provided them with the opportunity to set their own points of focus. To generate narratives, all interviews were opened with the question: 'Please tell me about your path into HE research. How did it come about that you are now in HE research?' The initial narratives were followed up by openly formulated guideline questions that were used flexibly in the interview situation and focused, among other things, on each participant's educational transitions, employment, personal life and future plans.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Zoom between 2022 and 2024. Each interview of 70–90 min was recorded and transcribed with permission for



**Figure 1.** Visual summary of the research design, sampling process and data analysis.

**Table 1.** Disciplinary and professional backgrounds of participants.

Name	Study field 1	Study field 2	Employment
Jamie	Economics	Political Science	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research
Alex	Sociology	–	General University Staff
Charlie	Bachelor of Education in Primary School Teaching	Educational Science	PhD position
Riley	Business and Economics	International MA Research in Higher Education	PhD position
Lou	Sociology	–	General University Staff
Taylor	Psychology	Sports Science	General University Staff
Jordan	Business Administration	Business Education	PhD position
Toni	Psychology	–	PhD position
Kim	Sociology	Economic Sciences / Business and Economics	General University Staff
Mika	Economics	Socioeconomics	Higher Education Research Institute
Luca	Marketing Management	Business and Management	PhD position
Joe	Sociology	Statistics	Higher Education Research Institute

subsequent analysis. Participants were fully informed about the research objectives and provided voluntary consent prior to the interviews. Given the relatively small field of HE in Austria, and the even smaller subset of ECRs, ensuring anonymity is crucial. Thus, institutions are not mentioned by name, and respondents were ascribed pseudonyms. For the same reasons, all names used in the manuscript are deliberately gender-neutral. Beyond aggregated information, personal identifiers such as age or more detailed demographic characteristics are masked to maintain participant anonymity and prevent identification. The Board for Ethical Questions in Science of the University of Innsbruck has reviewed the project and certified that it has been conducted in correspondence with all requirements of the ethical principles and the guidelines of good scientific practice. The data was anonymised and then analysed using reconstructive methods and coding, following the approach outlined by Froschauer and Lueger (2020).

## Findings

In our study we reconstructed four CoP that shape ECRs' processes of integrating into HE studies and that contribute to identifying as a HE researcher: (1) (under-)graduate studies prior to the PhD, (2) workplace, (3) research and (4) scientific networks. In addition, we found that mentoring represents an important aspect for socialisation processes of ECRs in becoming HE researchers that takes place within all four CoP. We therefore present it as a fifth, transverse dimension, navigating the processes of 'novices' to become members of a field.

### *(Under-)graduate studies prior to the PhD*

Findings show that study experiences prior to the PhD<sup>1</sup> initiated first meaningful relations with the academic field and therefore laid the foundations for socialisation into the field of HE studies. Despite shared knowledge, the undergraduate and graduate studies fostered affective bonds within HE institutions (e.g., via feelings of enthusiasm, passion, curiosity), leading to creating a sense of belonging and identification with the academic field. While familiarising oneself with the academic field is part of the

socialisation processes of becoming an academic in general, one specificity of becoming a HE scholar lies in realising and experiencing that HE can be an intriguing subject of study itself. Therefore, we reconstructed the studies prior to the PhD as an important CoP, constituted by peers, university lecturers, specific topics and affective dynamics.

For some, study experiences prior to the PhD created the desire to pursue a career in academia. This becomes evident when participants talk about discovering a strong passion for studying and engaging with various aspects of university education.

It really excited me. Yes. And I think that was also a reason, even for my doctoral research in higher education or in that field, because it was important to me to show what the university is actually about. (Charlie)

Study experiences prior to the PhD offered the opportunity to come into contact with HE research, even though it was not labelled as such:

To be honest, I only had two small points of contact with higher education research during my studies. The first was an overview course on sociology [...]. When I was studying economics, [...] I was able to work on a student project, and we analysed logos and the development of university logos, and even then, I didn't realise that what we were doing here was actually higher education research. (Kim)

This speaks to the specific context of this study, in which HE studies are not offered as distinct study programmes but rather incorporated in study programmes such as sociology, educational sciences, economy, psychology or political sciences, pointing to a high level of interdisciplinarity.

The findings show that study experiences prior to the PhD encompass more than the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to specific themes or disciplinary issues. They entail the affective and collective development, cultivation and negotiation of a particular attitude towards academia. Moreover, they provide first contact with topics related to HE studies in a non-systematic way. Study experiences prior to the PhD create the aspiration to work *in* HE and do research *on* HE, which together shape ECRs' pathways into becoming a HE scholar. Nevertheless, academic study programmes played only a marginal role in shaping participants' engagement with HE research in a structured or institutionalised sense.

### **Workplace**

For many ECRs, their way into HE studies started as part of their professional pathway. At this point, they had not yet considered an academic career but had gained insights into academia (e.g., working in the department of teaching and study services) that sparked an interest in the field of HE research. Some who worked at universities (e.g., student research assistants, tutors) were encouraged by their supervisors, who worked in or close to the field of HE research, to stay in academia and start a PhD:

At that time when I applied for this position, I was still studying for a Master's degree and I actually only did this on the advice of another professor for whom I worked as a study assistant and [...] so I thought to myself I'll just give it a try. (Charlie)

However, due to the demands of the neoliberal university which is connected to the growth of precarious academic positions (Vander Kloet & Campisi, 2024) and difficulties

to find employment after graduation in certain fields like humanities and social sciences, administrative positions in HE institutions provide a stable ‘exit option’ (Petersen, 2011, pp. 36–38). Alex, who works in an administrative position, talks about the stress of finding a job after graduate studies:

I always had this underlying stress about ending up unemployed — which, luckily, didn’t happen [short laugh]. After graduation, I just started applying anywhere that seemed like a good fit, quite randomly, really. (Alex)

Staying in the university environment as professional staff, then, familiarised the study participants with the field of HE studies and exposed them to new options for pursuing an academic career:

I think I had eight years of really intensive marketing training, didn’t get a PhD position, and then applied to university management where I didn’t even know that this field even existed until I applied, and then I got the position, so that’s ... sometimes it’s just coincidences that play out like that. (Luca)

Some were already scholars wishing to stay in academia and were able to do so by becoming HE researchers. The field of HE research then became a means to an end. By taking the path into HE research, they were able to ensure that they could continue to work as researchers. The research activity therefore had a higher priority than the specific themes of research:

In my case, it was actually through my employer that I ended up in higher education research. I was previously working in a different field of research, but also at an institution for applied research. (Mika)

In summary, none of our participants originally set out to become scholars in HE research, and their career paths were highly diverse. Instead, their way into HE research was partly shaped by career-related decisions in the context of their learning processes situated in their workplace. This CoP made them aware of HE studies as an academic field, offered insights into HE institutions and provided them with job opportunities. The workplace thus plays a key role in opening up access to HE research, often serving as the first site of exposure and engagement with the field. However, the workplace did not simply guide ECRs into the field, but functioned as dynamic spaces where interests were interactively shaped and sometimes contested.

## Research

While our study participants were initially socialised in more traditional disciplines (e.g., sociology, educational sciences or political sciences) or subfields (e.g., sociology of education), some found their way into HE studies through their research focusing on a topic related to HE. This illustrates that the field of HE research is characterised by an openness and blurred boundaries, which open up various possibilities of creating a sense of belonging and identification with the field of HE research.

The purpose and practical relevance of knowledge production in HE adds a specific dimension to the character of HE research. Toni, for instance, does research on university students’ learning and works for a public institution informing HE policy and practice:

I feel like [in my job] I am rather on the other side of the research chain, so to speak. [...]. In my position I have to think from the perspective of the [public institution]. (Toni)

Due to their workplace, Toni is aware of the relevance of HE research utilised for policy-related decisions. For them, identifying as a HE scholar mainly comes from experiencing HE research being used in practice by practitioners, HE managers and policy makers.

The heterogeneity of actors involved in the CoP represents an additional ‘pull factor’ into the field of HE research. This can be exemplified by the case of Kim, who is conducting their PhD research project in Science and Technology Studies (STS). Throughout their participation in research and related activities (e.g., attending conferences, reading scientific papers in different journals, exchange with peers and scholars), they have experienced the disciplinary boundaries within STS as more rigid compared to those within HE research:

So the approach [of STS] is interdisciplinary, but the field itself I feel is much more sedimented and exclusive than higher education research. [...] For me, higher education research is done by people who work in teaching themselves, and then do a bit about higher education didactics or something like that, for example, or people who actually work in higher education management. (Kim)

For Kim, the interdisciplinary aspect of HE research is not only reflected by openness regarding the participation of academics from different fields of study, but also the involvement of multiple actors working in different areas of HE (e.g., teaching, didactics, management). This twofold openness of the HE field serves in Kim’s case as a positive source for identifying with the discipline.

However, this openness also creates spaces where meanings and roles need to be actively negotiated between actors with differing expectations and positions. Lou, for instance, highlights the tension between administrative work and academic identity:

It’s a completely administrative position, where the research part ... is more of a private pleasure. (Lou)

Lou’s experience being employed as general university staff illustrates how academic practices and identities can be marginalised or decoupled from formal roles, depending on how they are institutionally situated and recognised by others within the community.

Research as a CoP brings together scholars investigating topics related to the field, actors relying on HE research for policy-related decisions as well as practitioners working in HE. In this way, this CoP allows access for scholars with various backgrounds. However, this openness may also obscure that opportunities to pursue research are unequally distributed, depending on institutional positioning, access to resources, or the formal recognition of research activities within one’s role. For some participants, the ability to engage in HE research required negotiating structural constraints and carving out informal spaces for research endeavours.

### **Scientific networks**

Scientific networks contribute to socialisation into the realm of HE research in two specific ways: (1) cultivating awareness regarding HE as a distinct field of study, and (2) creating a sense of membership in a collective. Findings reveal that most of the interviewees were not familiar with the field of HE research prior to their involvement in

scientific networks, which can be attributed to the field's low level of institutionalism. For instance, Alex explains how participating in shared practices by being a member of a network within HE research impacted on their own positioning in the field:

There is also this network that carries 'higher education' in its name. I somehow got into it and then presented my research twice. That actually gave me the idea that it is actually higher education research that I do. Because I had thought I was somehow doing research at a higher education institution, but before I probably wouldn't have called it higher education research. (Alex)

Furthermore, our findings show that being part of a collective is not only relevant for identifying as a HE scholar, but also for staying in this field:

The integration into the [scientific network] is of course something that keeps us on the ball a bit. The social aspect of the association. [...] Getting to know new people that you want to see again, reporting on your progress and so on. That helps to keep you in the loop. (Lou)

Fostering relationships and engaging in field-specific practices does not only provide professional support, commitment and accountability, but also nurtures retention and persistence. However, access to such collectives is not always guaranteed or stable. Riley reflects on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their experience of scientific networking:

I believe in collaboration, and I believe in the power of a collective mindset. And I feel like that was taken away by the pandemic, because with all these virtual conferences, you couldn't really connect to people. (Riley)

Riley's statement illustrates how the maintenance of relationships within scientific networks is contingent on external conditions. It also underscores that CoPs are not seamless or automatically inclusive; access, recognition, and meaningful participation are subject to fluctuation and negotiation over time.

Scientific networks as a CoP seem particularly relevant for the field of HE research, since our study participants are mostly affiliated to other disciplines and many of them are employed in work contexts not directly related to research, which makes access to such networks both essential and at times contingent or unevenly distributed.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring by significant others, particularly professors, superiors and supervisors was found across all reconstructed CoPs and represents another layer for socialisation processes of early career scholars into HE research.

In our data mentors act as central figures during undergraduate and graduate studies in the role of lecturers and professors, at the workplace in the role of superiors, in research as supervisors and in scientific networks as gatekeepers. By spending time with their mentees and acknowledging their work, they foster a sense of belonging in academia in general and HE studies in particular. This is especially relevant for those working outside of academia, such as Jamie:

Because they [supervisor] already have a lot on their plate, but somehow they wanted to take their time to meet with me regularly. [...] That's the explicit feedback. It comes from just one person in this case, but it's an important person. (Jamie)

By experiencing the supervisor wanting to meet regularly, Jamie feels reassured that their work is valued and that they belong to the research community, particularly because their supervisor occupies a relevant, respectable position within the field of HE research. In Charlie's case, they only started to develop the idea of becoming a researcher because of a professor who encouraged them to apply for an academic position.

Furthermore, mentors help in navigating interdisciplinarity, the complexity of topics, political and institutional frameworks, specific career paths and fostering the necessary supportive environment. As representatives of the field of HE studies, they provide recognition to ECRs and thus contribute to the development of a sense of belonging. However, these relationships are not free of tension: mentors also represent established norms and expectations, which may not always align with the ECRs' own interests, leading to moments of disappointment or ambivalence. This finding may not only apply to HE research, but ultimately to socialisation processes into academia in general (Hagler et al., 2024).

## Discussion

Findings show that there is no 'general' pathway to becoming a researcher in HE studies. On the contrary, this study highlighted the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds as well as the heterogeneity of careers. This aligns with research arguing that HE studies are particularly diverse in disciplinary influence (Harland, 2012; Tight, 2020) and backgrounds of those working in the field (scholars, practitioners and administrative professionals; Tight, 2012).

Four CoPs as well as the role of mentors proved to be relevant for becoming researchers in the field of HE studies. Undergraduate and graduate studies prior to the PhD (1) often mark the first encounter with topics related to HE studies. More importantly, this CoP not only affectively initiates aspirations to work *in* HE, but also to do research *on* HE. While study programmes may spark an initial interest in HE as a topic, they hardly provide a structured or institutionalised pathway into HE research. In contrast to more traditionally structured disciplines, the field of HE research offers neither a clear institutional anchoring nor a standardised academic training route.

Therefore, the workplace (2) as a CoP often introduces ECRs to the field of HE studies and ultimately becoming a member of the field, often even before officially starting their PhD or pursuing an academic career. The lack of formal pathways foregrounds the structuring role of the workplace as a key CoP; in the absence of dedicated undergraduate or graduate programmes in HE research, workplaces often act as initial points of exposure to the field. From there, engagement with specific research topics becomes particularly significant.

The openness of the CoP 'research' (3) offers multiple ways to create a sense of belonging to the field of HE studies. Notably, experiencing one's research as applicable gives meaning to one's endeavours. This reveals the crucial nature of the practice-related aspect of HE studies, since experiencing one's academic work as meaningful plays a pivotal role for becoming an academic and pursuing an academic career (Cidlinska et al., 2023). However, not all participants had the opportunity to engage with research in this way. For some – particularly those in administrative or general staff roles – their 'own' research was not formally recognised as part of their position.

In such cases, scientific networks become all the more important, as they enable researchers to connect, identify with, and make sense of HE research as an academic practice.

Scientific networks (4) dedicated to HE studies contribute to cultivating awareness regarding HE as a distinct field of study and serve as a key factor for creating membership in a collective. Participating in such networks is crucial to strengthening the identities of ECRs and their sense of belonging (Mantai, 2019), sometimes compensating for those aspects that may otherwise be lacking in the transition to an academic career.

The role of mentors as ‘gatekeepers’ (Enright & Facer, 2017) that came across in all four CoP also facilitates identity formation of ECRs as ‘HE researchers’, as previously highlighted by others in the contexts of other disciplines (Monereo & Liesa, 2022). While mentors provide essential support and orientation, these relationships also involve navigating hierarchical structures and implicit expectations.

An important theme that emerged across all interviews was the significant role of contingency (e.g., chance encounters, job advertisements, or informal conversations) in shaping the pathway into HE research. Many participants indicated that, had certain opportunities not arisen at specific moments, they might have pursued entirely different topics or career trajectories in other disciplines. This highlights the dynamic and situational nature of career development in this field, which involves continuous negotiation of direction, identity, and belonging. These findings underscore the need to conceptualise CoPs not as static or neatly bounded entities, but as fluid and continuously negotiated spaces. Boundaries are shaped through ongoing interaction and (power) struggles, and may shift depending on contextual factors such as institutional setting, interpersonal dynamics, and unplanned incidents.

Analysing the process of becoming a HE researcher and how various CoPs shape this endeavour showed that, first, individuals gradually move from the periphery to the core of the community, reflecting what Lave and Wenger (2002) call ‘peripheral participation’. This phase includes, for example, developing an aspiration to pursue an academic career, becoming aware that the field of HE studies exists, situating one’s research topics in HE studies and forming connections to the field through the workplace. This transition is not linear or automatic but involves ongoing negotiation of one’s position within and across CoPs. Second, participation in CoPs facilitates the construction of academics’ professional identities as HE researchers. This becomes evident in our data, with participants building meaningful connections to other scholars who are part of the HE research field, that is mentors and peers, and sharing practices such as presenting research progress. These interactions also illustrate how academic identities are mediated in practice, as researchers continuously position themselves in relation to others and to the shared norms and expectations of the field.

While some of the challenges and paths described by our participants may resonate with broader experiences of ECRs in academia, our findings are specific to a field that remains largely under-researched. The field of HE research is not yet formally institutionalised in Austria; it is not embedded in standard curricula at the BA or MA level, nor does it offer well-defined career pathways. This structural openness means that entry into the field heavily depends on the existence and accessibility of CoPs, which support socialisation, knowledge exchange, and identity development. Our analysis shows that these

CoPs are not merely support structures but are constitutive for the field's very existence and reproduction. That our findings resonate with patterns observed in other disciplines (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010) strengthens their credibility and highlights the need for context-sensitive research into how academic fields take shape under specific structural conditions.

## Conclusion

The field of HE is characterised by a relatively low level of institutionalisation and a high degree of interdisciplinarity and diversity among the actors involved. That many ECRs arrive in the field from adjacent disciplines reflects not only personal academic trajectories, but also the structural evolution of HE research within the context of managerial reforms and shifting institutional priorities. By examining the processes through which ECRs become HE researchers, our study contributes to the field by demonstrating that this 'fuzziness' can be deemed positive. The participants expressed a high level of appreciation for the openness and inclusiveness of the field, which they perceived as facilitating a sense of belonging. This resonates with the findings of Steinhardt and Schneijderberg (2014), which note that although an academic career in HE research is challenging, the field's heterogeneity offers diverse career opportunities. However, this lack of clear career paths can lead to job insecurity and precariousness, as scholars may find it difficult to secure permanent or long-term employment within the field. Particularly the New Public Management framework has contributed to a rise in short-term contracts and casualised academic labour, making career paths less predictable and reinforcing a growing divide between research-focused and practice-oriented staff. This might fuel the applied nature of HE research, as many scholars opt for careers outside of academic professions.

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is one of the first studies that addresses pathways of emerging HE researchers. Our study also reveals that ECRs enter the field of HE research with a wide array of background experiences, motivations and academic and social circumstances, as well as differing capacities for research and scholarly productivity (Coryell et al., 2013; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Understanding these diverse entry points and progression rates is essential for designing supportive academic environments that can accommodate and nurture the varied needs of ECRs.

The study also suggests that processes of becoming a HE researcher are not without friction. While the field is often perceived as open and welcoming, our findings primarily reflect the perspectives of those who are already part of this community. This presents a limitation of our study, as it excludes the experiences of individuals who are not yet members of HE studies. Future investigations could address this gap by exploring the barriers faced by those outside the community or who have 'failed' to become members. In light of the precariousness that pervades academia, it is imperative to address those who are on the cusp, who do not feel welcome or do not become integrated into a CoP. Additionally, many more biographical aspects that shape the process of becoming a scholar (e.g., family background, gender, social class; see Chang et al., 2013) have not been further explored, highlighting another limitation. Addressing these aspects in future studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse pathways into HE studies.

## Note

1. In the Austrian HE context this includes: undergraduate studies (completed with a bachelor degree) and graduate studies (completed with a master's degree, which is a prerequisite for starting a PhD).

## Credit authorship contribution statement

The first two authors, Flora Petrik and Franziska Lessky, contributed equally to the study conception, its research design, analysis of data and the original draft of the manuscript. Material preparation, data collection and initial coding were performed by Larissa Bartok, Magdalena Fellner and Sabine Weiß. All authors read, reviewed, edited and approved the final manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by HoFo – Netzwerk Hochschulforschung Österreich.

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