

Combatting Precarious Job Conditions in Academia

Background and concerns:

A main objective of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) is to improve understanding of world societies¹ and to promote professional communication and cooperation between European social anthropologists. From 2016 to 2018 EASA's Executive Committee in collaboration with the PrecAnthro Collective aimed to identify and analyse academic precarity among anthropologists in Europe and beyond in order to **develop strategies of "shared responsibilities"** to combat it.

The accelerated changes of the current period have produced precarity that has far-reaching social effects. This position paper focuses on precarity within European academia and scrutinizes how the European Commission, the European Research Council (ERC) and the national funding bodies that strive for academic **excellence and mobility** are feeding into the production of academic precarity. A key mechanism in this regard is the transition from institutional block grant funding to output-oriented, project-based (and therefore temporary) funding, which is encouraging "postdoc bubbles" but creates no firm future for skilled postdocs.

Precarious academics are those working in a variety of contractual arrangements. These include zero-hours or short-term contracts, and range from weeks to years and may comprise multiple contracts either in series or parallel. More than 60% of all anthropologists associated within EASA are working under precarious conditions, ranging from 95% of those under 30 years old to about 40% of those aged 46–55 years.²

Mobility has grown considerably across borders within the European Research Area (ERA). According to the 2018 EASA survey on precarity, fully 50% of EASA members have changed country within the last five years, and 10% did so more than three times, many under such EU-funded mobility schemes as Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions and as PIs and researchers in ERC grants (as also underlined by the report on researchers' mobility³). Mobility has developed from an *opportunity* for the few into a *prerequisite* for an academic career (European Science 2016).

Mobility carries significant barriers and high costs for young scholars from **third countries** who are trained in the ERA and often prevented from long-term career opportunities by restrictive immigration regulations. Political authoritarianism and economic crises further deteriorate labour arrangements for this group.

The **vulnerability** of early career academics and the risks to which they are exposed under conditions of **normalized precarity** may destabilize their future choices, social environments and family lives. Mechanisms contributing to precarity that connect these trends need to be specified and linked with the **diversity** of academia, disciplines and scientific traditions within Europe.

Aims and suggestions:

- To consider the effects, particularly on early career academics, of increasingly **project-based universities** with a singular focus on competition and accountability
- To rethink (in collaboration with the national/EU institutions and governments) options for **rebalancing social, family and professional life**
- To enhance the stability and permanence of employment following the **European Charter for Researchers and the EU Directive on Fixed Term Work**
- To develop **formal guidelines within the institutions and establish a code of conduct** for the provision of appropriate career development for scholars who take short-term research and teaching contracts at universities
- To provide a **set of good practices** and possible sanctions to promote secure **employment** conditions and social rights across borders (insurance, pension systems, social benefits for children and families)
- To enhance academic career opportunities for **third country nationals** and contribute to the protection of **scholars at risk**
- To analyse the actual conditions of precarious employment by putting in place a comprehensive **research program on precarity in academia**.

To achieve the long-term target of self-sustaining working conditions and permanent jobs, EASA calls on the European Commission and European Parliament to implement closely coordinated and integrated measures to fight precarious labour and underlines the need **to act** and find possible solutions in relation to **precarious academic employment** in Europe. Contact: georgeta.stoica@univ-mayotte.fr and sabine.strasser@anthro.unibe.ch.

¹ <https://www.easaonline.org/publications/policy/>

² EASA and PrecAnthro Collective's Survey on Employment and Academic Precarity 2018

³ https://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/fp7-evidence-base/experts_analysis/a.%20inzelt_-_researchers'_mobility.pdf