

The Shaping of Academic Careers in Sweden: networks, environments, and the legacy of doctoral training

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This study explores how Swedish researchers experience factors shaping their academic trajectories, focusing on the influence of local research environments and access to resources such as funding and infrastructure. Based on interviews with 26 individuals who completed PhDs in 2012 at a Swedish university across natural/technical sciences, social sciences, and medicine, the study highlights disciplinary variation and the significance of doctoral training models. Two dominant career tracks emerged: a teaching-focused track offering earlier permanent positions, and a research-oriented track involving a series of insecure positions reliant on external funding. Most participants followed a collective PhD model and continued in collaborative, research-oriented careers. Using Laudel and Gläser's framework of organizational, intellectual, and community careers, the study shows how chance, resources, networks, and social factors intersect with individual agency. Despite differing outcomes, few participants felt they had achieved the perceived "norm career" in academia. Preliminary findings indicate small gender differences.

Full paper

The aim of this study is to investigate how researchers experience factors that influence their career trajectories, with a particular focus on the impact of local research environments and access to resources such as funding, research time, and infrastructure. Special attention is given to variations across research fields (Becher, 1994) and gender differences (Silander, 2022).

Theoretically, the study builds on the notion that conditions during doctoral studies significantly shape future academic careers. Hakkarainen et al. (2014) identified two common models of doctoral programs: the individual and the collective. In the individual model, the doctoral student has considerable influence over the direction of their thesis and develops a close relationship with the supervisor. Theses in this model are often monographs. The collective model offers less autonomy, as the thesis is closely tied to the

supervisor's research. In this model, students are embedded in collaborative networks, and their theses typically consist of co-authored articles. The collective model is seen as beneficial for integrating students into academic communities and preparing them for research careers, though it has also faced critique. In addition, the study draws on Laudel and Gläser's (2008) framework, which outlines three interconnected but analytically distinct career trajectories: the *organizational* career (mobility between institutions and positions), the *intellectual* career (e.g., transitions between research topics), and the *community* career (rising visibility and recognition within scholarly communities).

The study is based on 26 qualitative interviews conducted 2023-25 with individuals who completed their PhDs in the natural/technical sciences, social sciences, or medicine in 2012 at a Swedish university and were working in the university sector at the time of the interview. The interviews were complemented with bibliographic materials—such as publication histories, co-authorship maps, sample publications, and/or patents—to help participants recall significant events and make abstract aspects like collaboration and access to resources more tangible. These materials also supported tailored interview questions. The analysis is based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Preliminary results indicate notable variation in organizational career trajectories across disciplines. Participants from the social sciences often secured permanent positions more quickly than those from the natural/technical sciences and medicine. Two dominant career tracks emerged. The first was linked to teaching, where it was possible to attain a permanent lecturer position either directly after completing the PhD or after holding adjunct or deputy lecturer positions for a few years. This track was explicitly tied to subject-specific needs, particularly a “need for teachers.” Participants on this track often held a dual identity as both university teachers and researchers. The second track was research-oriented and typically involved a succession of positions—one or more postdoctoral positions, followed by positions as researcher and assistant lecturer, and eventually permanent academic posts. This path was heavily dependent on external funding, and most participants primarily identified as researchers. In both tracks, early career progression was perceived as highly reliant on personal networks. While some participants secured positions through unfamiliar institutions or projects, it was more common to gain employment through recommendations. Full professorships were achieved by participants in both career tracks.

Most participants had a background in the collective PhD model and continued their intellectual development within collaborative research networks. Many initiated or joined new networks beyond their original supervisor or project group and pursued new research directions. Their intellectual careers often included transitions to senior roles such as project leaders and supervisors. Participants with a background in the individual model were found in the teaching-oriented track. Community careers—particularly aspects like reputation and visibility—were emphasized especially within the research-focused track.

Across all three trajectories, participants described a dynamic interplay between chance events (e.g., job openings, new collaborations), dependence on resources (e.g., lab access, external funding, skilled collaborators, silent knowledge), and deliberate choices. Social factors—both professional (e.g., ease of collaboration) and private (e.g., health, family life)—were seen as crucial to organizational and intellectual career decisions. Another key factor was intrinsic motivation, such as creativity and joy in academic work. Many participants described opting *not* to pursue strategically beneficial opportunities (e.g., mobility, continuing successful collaborations) emphasizing personal values over calculated advancement.

A recurring theme across interviews was a strong narrative about a “norm career” in academia—an idealized trajectory encompassing all three career dimensions. Interestingly, despite varying levels of professional success, few participants felt they had achieved this norm. Many questioned its relevance or realism, suggesting a dissonance between institutional expectations and individual experiences.

Preliminary findings suggest surprisingly small gender differences in career experiences. However, further analysis may provide more nuanced insights.