# Passion or pain? From interviews to meanings and stories.
# How have the academics experienced themselves at the university?

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ÕPPES TECH- METH international research group

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# LEARN/ÕPPES TECH-METH international research group 2021-2023



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# LEARN/ÕPPES TECH-METH research group



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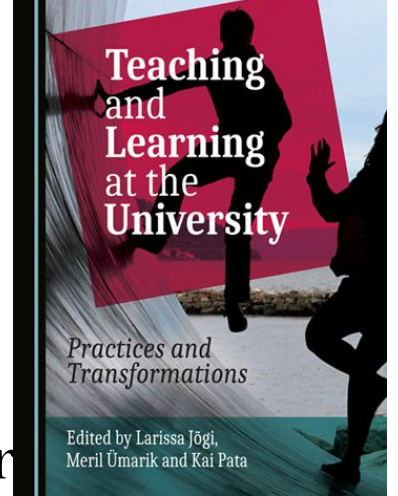TIIU TAMMEMÄE

ILONA-EVELYN RANNALA

KAIRE POVILAITIS

NIKOLAI KUNITSÕN

KOIDU SAIA

# OUR PATH

**I. 2016-2019** Learning and teaching at the university. Interdisciplinary perspectives.

**II. 2019-2022** Professional pathways of academics in the context of educational innovations and institutional changes. Exploring professional lives, identities, experiences and well being.

**III. 2021- 2022** Learning, teaching and integration of new technologies and approaches at the university

**IV. 2021-2023** International stage of the research project in cooperation with

*Malta University, Dr Maria Cutajar and Dr Pen Lister*

*Tampere University, Dr Vesa Korhonen and Aytuna Yamac*



Teaching and Learning at the University

Practices and Transformations

Edited by Larissa Jõgi, Meril Ümarik and Kai Pata

# Motivation of the research team

**Objective:** to create a strong international team and a conceptual framework for the research; looking to the future with a perspective and interdisciplinary approach, with the aim of analysing educational change and innovation at universities with the attention to university academic staff.

Changes in society, higher education and at the universities pose not only threats and tensions but also opportunities (Barnett 2006, Billot 2010, Yang 2021)

**We are interested in**

 the meanings and impacts of changes in the university, the professional experience and identity of teachers and their teaching practices

 in order to manage and learn from changes, it is necessary to notice, listen to and understand people at the university (s); to analyse the activities and paradigm shifts that those in and around change themselves experience, shape and embed.

# We know that **universities** are becoming super-complex, demanding and ambiguous spaces.

**Changes at universities** are multi-dimensional and include different dimensions:

- *administrative,*
- *research performance expectations*
- *competitive culture*
- *structural and power relations*
- *a culture of learning and teaching*
- *changes in learning and teaching practices.*

**MORE SIGNIFICANT AND MEANINGFUL, IMPORTANT AND ATTENTION-ALTERING CHANGES** take place in the identities and experiences of the academics

**No change is born of itself**

*Hargreaves, 2005; Hockley, 2014; Jõgi & Ümarik 2020, Yang 2021, Rogers & Swain, 2021)*

# Theoretical background

**Higher education institutions** and academics are being continuously challenged due to changes to re-define their roles, practices and identities.

**Adapting to changes and new roles** always involves re-considering and re-constructing professional identities.

**The academic career** tends to be linked more strongly to research and less to teaching practice and teaching excellence.

**The socio-cultural paradigm** explains developing of identity and experience in relation to environments and relations between the people and groups.

# Theoretical background

**Academic identities** become more contested and highly fragmented due to subidentites and dual roles

- The multiple and fragmented identities of academics lead to identity tensions
- The roles of academics are not only structural positions, but also involve shifts in values, beliefs and sense-making

**Professional identity**

is not a stable entity, "fixed and frozen" (McAdams et al. 2002, 7), but rather as a complex that is personal and shaped by contextual factors (Aldrin2015; Lasky 2005);

- it is seen as a practice of articulating and performing identity positions in personal and narrative experiences (LaPointe 2010, 2).

*Barnett 2003; Jõgi, Ümarik, Oder 2020; Modernisation of Higher Education, 2017; Yang at al 2021, Shams 2019*

# Research Problem: there is a tensions between personal identities and university environment surrounding it.

- **Forming the identity of academics** means becoming aware of what matters most in the professional practice and what experience, values, relations and interests shape the development of identities (Trede 2012, 163).

- **The significance of the identity of academics** is related to how the identity may contribute to the teaching and research practice, how academics experience the university environment, relations and well being.

- **The interplay between the identity, teaching-researching practice of academics and the university environment has not been much explored in international context** ( Jõgi, Ümarik, Oder 2020; Pata, Ümarik Jõgi 2020).

# Research question

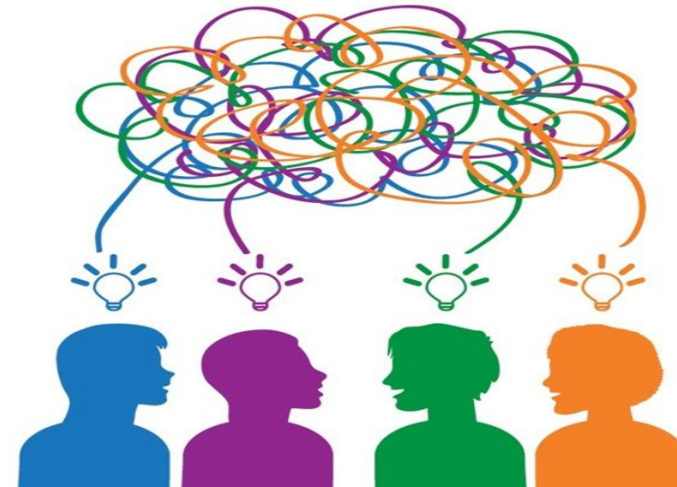**How have the academics experienced themselves at the university?**

# Three sample groups

**The sample groups (n-40)** were formed based on two criteria: participants with at least two years of work experience and second, participants had to agree to participate in the study voluntarily.

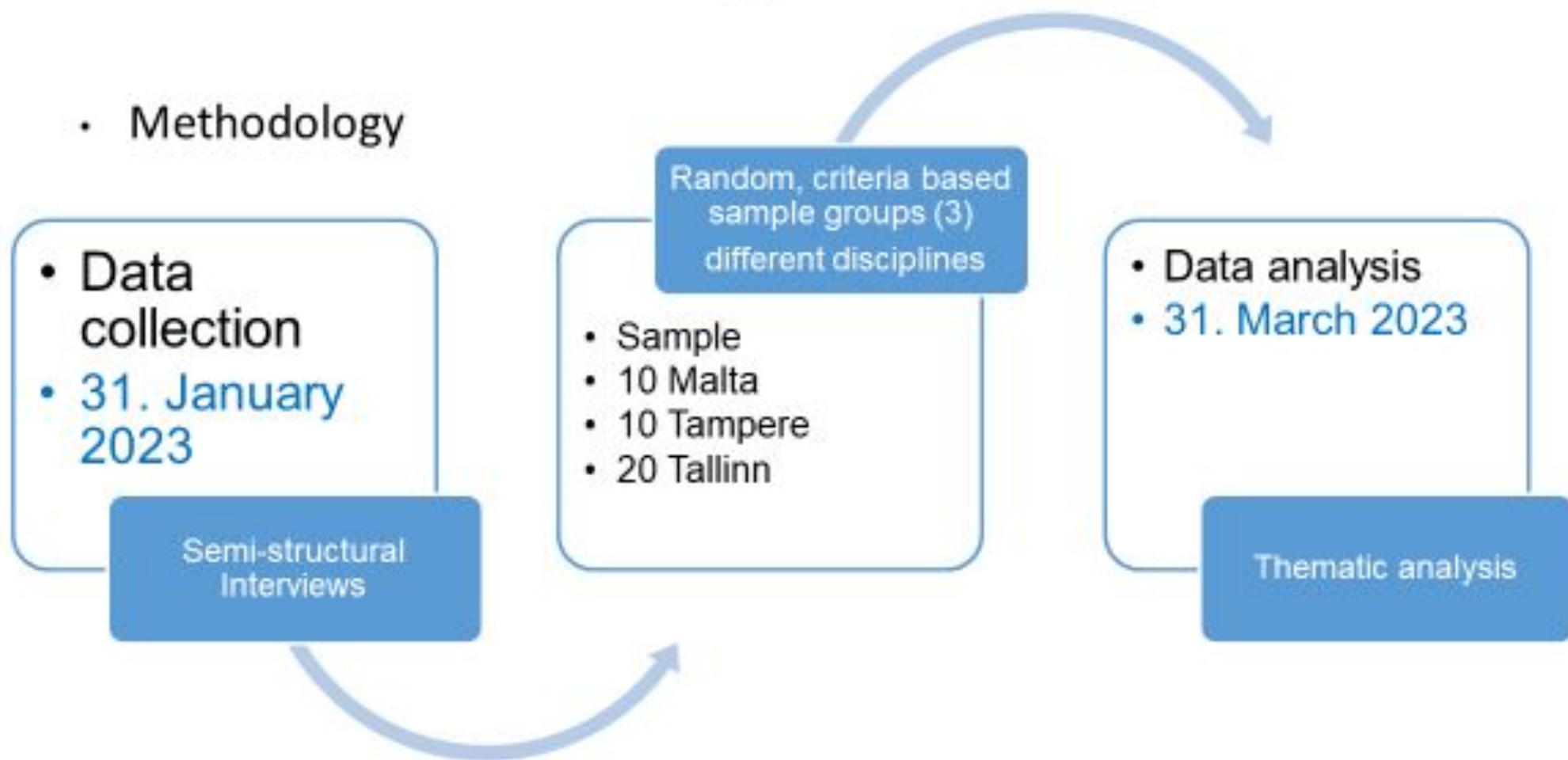Malta University N-10

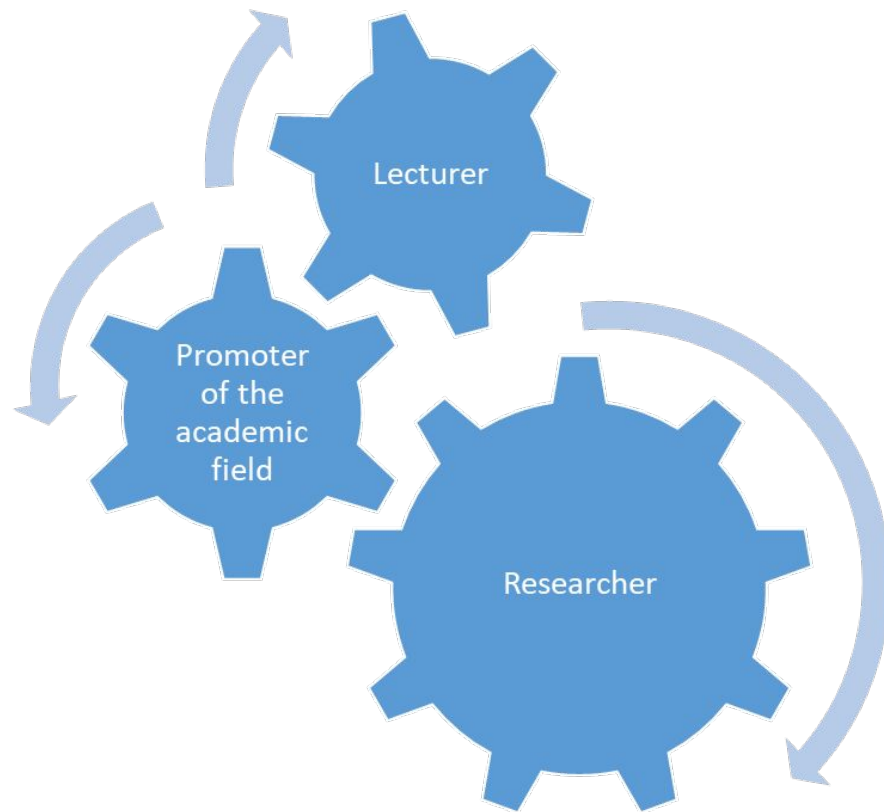Tallinn University N-20

Tampere University N-10

# International stage of the research

- Methodology

- **Data collection**
- **31. January 2023**

  Semi-structural Interviews

  Random, criteria based sample groups (3) different disciplines

- Sample
- 10 Malta
- 10 Tampere
- 20 Tallinn

- **Data analysis**
- **31. March 2023**

  Thematic analysis

# Becoming and being an Academic



- Different paths to enter Academia
- The most valued aspects are AUTONOMY, MEANINGFULNESS of academic work and COLLEGIALITY, also negatively affected by changes in university context/neo-liberal trends
- Constant need to negotiate identities due to personal or context related factors (e.g. funding, tenure-track system)

# Constant need to negotiate identities that can bring…

- **Frustration**
- Peaceful reconciliation
- Resistance
- Silent withdrawal

"**And as long as these things don't change here at the university, I'll just do what I want. And no one is going to tell me what to do.** Give me that teacher's salary, I'll be with it… on the side I'll do as much science as I can and… and be, be with it right now." (INT 2)

"Yes, well, if until now **I always thought of myself as a researcher,** then the **university's career model has made me think of myself perhaps more than a lecturer** or… not that I have little ambition, but I feel that I am like out of it, **stuck in the wheels of life**.. At the moment, **I don't really see any academic career…"** (INT2)

# Some more examples…

„Well, in the sense that.. the idea of my career path that I had maybe **four or five years ago… was clearly more of a researcher, but now I have clearly acquired the identity of a teacher or lecturer** and in that sense it's like…. significantly changed my perception of who I am, what I do" (INT 4)

„If I could find a **sufficient balance** here in Tallinn and **if my work is appreciated**, I would gladly stay at Tallinn University, **because I like this job enough**, I know how to do it, I like the students here." (INT 4)

# Some more examples

„I remember that when I finished my PhD, I don't remember how many project applications I wrote, I think dozens, **but I was rejected everywhere. And it was frustrating…"**

„**I am very happy** in that sense... that I have considered **the university to be a bastion of freedom,** so to speak, that I can still be quite free here in what I do. That I really like it, that **I am very happy that I work at the university."**
(INT 19)

„… **Because I can't imagine being a full-time lecturer**. I would still ideally like to continue this research and teaching like this, yes, like a combined version, but for that, project funds are needed. And no one will bring them to you, you have to have them yourself.... to bring it by yourself.

The question is whether you have to accept it, that maybe you can also fight against it." (INT 21)

# Meaning of work and wellbeing – looking for balance

**Balance in terms of…**

- Personal vs professional life
- Between different work roles
- Tasks that are meaningful vs required

# Constant dialogue between self and environment in order to feel…

- Empowered
- Readiness for cooperation
- Readiness to share practices
- Belonging

"…the fact **that I don't cooperate with the people in my unit, it's also like a symptom in a way**, it shows something and **it shows something about me, it also shows something about this unit**, right. Well, in a nutshell, politely, we don't have a very good… how do I say, our research doesn't mesh very well, that, that **I'm kind of like a lone wolf out there.**"

(INT 21)

# Factors in the university environment perceived as SUPPORTIVE

**Good relationships**

**Collaborative culture**

Management support

Academic freedom

"**There is support. I have colleagues.** Those with whom I work, well, yes, I still have a few colleagues whom I see from time to time or, or with whom we have small, small opportunities to work together." (INT 21)

"And I don't even know where this luck came from, that we certainly have, we have s**uch a supportive director** at the institute. That I can absolutely confidently go to him with any concern, he always finds a solution. And in exactly the same way that he has let me choose, to do exactly what I want, negotiating, of course, not quite like that." (INT 8)

"/../ **I'm very lucky** to be, I've had **absolute freedom to do what I want**, what turns me on." (INT 8)

# Factors in the university environment perceived as HINDERING

Pure relationships

**Workload**

**Competitive culture**

Non-supportive management

Regulations

"There are very bad experiences, where, well, when you are completely, really, as if **hindered, by someone's ego, simply because you are nobody**, if you are a junior researcher. So what's the point of you here, how come you come here to do some things… /…/ Yes, there are also many **people with whom instead of cooperating, it is the opposite**. Well, let's focus on what is good. (INT 8)

Maybe there's even been a **bit of bullying at work,** but it's all been pretty, well, so mild that I've decided I'm not going to deal with it because I just haven't been able to put my energy into it and just thought , that **I focus on my strengths and not on other people's problems**. (INT 21)

# Some more examples

"/…/ but I think that this **teaching load is still too much for a lecturer role** at Tallinn University. That it should be…. **there should be more balance between doing research and teaching.**" (INT 4)

"…that **the unit should be the one that essentially empowers me**, but well, as I already said before, I don't like these linking of topics with my unit very well, **I don't get that kind of meaningful empowerment from there.**" (INT21)

"In a university, everything must be interdisciplinary. And actually, **when you started looking at the rules, it was completely discouraging.** /…/ actually it's not possible /…/" (INT 8)

# Academics` meaning of university´s environment – looking for balance



Image by Ada K from Pixabay

**Balance in terms of…**

- expectations to their role vs workload
- individual vs collaborative activities
- belonging vs loneliness
- regulations that lead to competitive culture

# Experience of academics

- is contradictory and involves continuous adaptation, efforts, readiness to manage different roles, especially dual roles: teacher and researcher

- is associated with the challenges and concerns about excessive workloads

- engaging in teaching and research is highly valued

- related to the variations of meanings of roles, relationships, sense of identity and future selves that have developed within the academic environment

BEING and BECOMING A UNIVERSITY TEACHER accompanied by emotions, frustrations, developing of values and roles with variation of meanings of the experience and identity

The formation of the identity is a uncertain process with the period(s) of fragility, strong emotions and inner dissonance, which could be a temporal or ingoing and permanent

## SUMMING UP

- **Beginning of the academic careers** is inspirational, but also demanding

- **The demands** related to academic environment, to the formation of academic roles and identity.

- **In the process of adaptation and formation of identity** academics have to cope with the contradictions, uncertainties of dual roles (teacher-researcher, and the high workload.

- **Identity construction** is complicated, never-ending, sense-making process in personal and social context

- **University environment** and **academic requirements, dual roles and personal experiences** create a emotional and social tensions and some kind an identity *trap*.

# Concluding Reflections

**OUR RESEARCH** offers a case in point of neo-liberal effects in higher education

**ACADEMICS** need to be, do and perform more than ever before and must "hustle harder and impress sooner" (Zipin & Nuttall, 2016, p. 352)

**Experience** is diverse, emotional, but is highly valued.

However there are signs of temporal or permanent frustrations and need for balance

**University environment** and academic requirements, dual roles and personal experiences create a emotional and social tensions and some kind an **identity** *trap (liminality of identity)*

**IDENTITY** orientation, process and perspective framed primarily at the university context

# Questions for future discussion

How to hold sub-identities of academics or how to hold teaching and research (and sometimes administration) coherently without tensions?

How the developing of identity could be supported?