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Early Career Researchers as Stakeholders in University Decision-Making in Europe: Comparative Perspectives

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Abstract

The voices of academics have traditionally been strong in university decision-making bodies, where they participated in the shared governance of the university. It has been customary for senior academics to be represented in managing bodies and to exercise control over the key areas of strategy, finance, quality assurance, study programs, and/or human resources. With the new public management reforms that have swept through higher education (HE) systems, the power of academics has been reduced, while managerial guidance has increased, alongside the fostering of universities' institutional autonomy. At the same time, the power of other stakeholders, such as students or industry representatives, has also been increasing as part and parcel of the governance reforms, albeit to different degrees and at different paces across various HE systems. In this context, this article seeks to examine the role that early career researchers (ECRs) play in university decision-making bodies across different countries as internal stakeholders. The research is based on seven case studies from seven European and East Mediterranean countries drawing on documentary data and 55 semi-structured interviews with ECRs and 14 managers, carried out in 2023–2024. Following stakeholder categories distinguished on the basis of their legitimacy, urgency, and power, this

article investigates the extent to which ECRs perceive their voices to be heard. The findings show variance between the case studies regarding formal representation, with most universities in the study having limited representation of ECRs in university and faculty/school-level decision-making bodies. The voices of ECRs, however, are heard in informal ways.

Keywords
decision-making; early career researchers; power; representation; stakeholders; university governance; university; voice

1. Introduction

In recent decades, governance models for higher education institutions (HEIs) have undergone several transformations, driven by multiple forces, including the influence of new public management (NPM) reforms. One of the main effects of these transformations is the replacement of collegiality with top-down decision-making models, leading to a concentration of power at the highest tiers, which include professional managers (Leišytė et al., 2023; Želvys et al., 2021). This shift creates tensions between traditional models of academic self-governance (De Boer et al., 2008) and the contemporary demands for centralised administrative control.

For early career researchers (ECRs), these tensions pose particular challenges, since ECRs are in their formative years in the academic profession, often employed on temporary contracts, while at the same time being heavily involved in teaching and research. There is no universal definition of ECRs, since this broad category of academics is shaped by national and institutional historical career structures, cultural disciplinary norms, and the broader academic labour quasi-markets (Finkelstein & Jones, 2019; Musselin, 2005; see also Supplementary File 1 for more details). ECRs in this study are defined as researchers pursuing their PhDs or those within eight years of obtaining their PhDs—typically including doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers.

Nonetheless, their participation in decision-making processes tends to be limited due to traditional academic hierarchies. ECRs already navigate structural constraints imposed by academic hierarchies, where senior academics typically hold decision-making authority. The voices of academics have traditionally been strong in university decision-making bodies, where their participation was a part of the collegial governance model. It has been customary for senior academics to be represented in decision-making bodies and exercise control over a number the key areas of governance, including university strategy, finance, quality assurance, study programmes, and human resources. The implementation of NPM reforms has resulted in a reduction of the power held by academics within HE systems, while the influence of managerial guidance has increased, leading to the fostering of institutional autonomy in HE (Leišytė et al., 2023), and solidifying the professional management and centralisation of university decision-making.

The introduction of NPM policies further exacerbates these constraints, potentially restricting the ability of ECRs to contribute meaningfully to governance discussions. As a result, the voice of ECRs in university governance may be doubly constrained—both by entrenched academic traditions and by the managerialist frameworks that shape modern universities.

The exclusion of ECRs' voices in governance is a critical issue, not only for ECRs themselves but for the broader academic community. Ensuring that ECRs have a platform from which to contribute to governance decisions is essential for fostering inclusive academic environments. Inclusion in governance can provide ECRs with opportunities for professional development, strengthen their sense of belonging, and enhance institutional decision-making by incorporating diverse perspectives. Moreover, a governance system that acknowledges and integrates the voices of ECRs can contribute to the overall health and innovation of the HE sector. Moreover, the inclusion of ECRs in decision-making bodies is crucial as they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that can drive positive change within HEIs (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Participating in these bodies would enable ECRs to develop the valuable skills and networks that are essential for career advancement (Robinson et al., 2016) while also serving to bridge the gap between early-career researchers and established professionals (Gustafsson et al., 2020; Haider et al., 2018). Furthermore, it would give ECRs the opportunity to effectively articulate the challenges related to their representation and the inherent precarity of their positions (Bonello & Wånggren, 2023; Signoret et al., 2019). Further, ECRs' contributions are paramount for HEIs, in terms of the work they do and the funding they obtain; thus, one may expect this to be accompanied by a rise in the power they possess within the academic hierarchy and organisation, despite the "invisible" nature of their work in HEIs (Carvalho et al., 2022). However, while gender and ethnic diversity in the decision-making process have gained considerable attention (Leišytė et al., 2022), the issue of ECRs has remained underexplored, despite the growing recognition of their role as key contributors to the academic system (Klemenčič, 2012; Leišytė et al., 2023; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015).

Thus, this article seeks to examine what role ECRs play in university decision-making bodies across different countries as internal stakeholders, posing the following research question: What is the agency of ECRs in university decision-making, and how does this agency compare across different HE systems?

We utilise a qualitative research design, drawing on face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews, carried out in 2023–2024, with ECRs, managers, and HR administrators from research universities in seven countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Portugal, and Türkiye.

This article highlights that integrating ECRs' voices in decision-making is key to promoting diversity and inclusion. By examining ECRs' roles in formal and informal decision-making bodies across different case study institutions and countries, we contribute to stakeholder theory and the literature on the governance of the academic profession.

2. Challenges ECRs Face in Academia and HEIs

The literature highlights that ECRs face a number of challenges in academia, including employment insecurity, limited resources and access to resources such as funding, networking, and mentorship opportunities, as well as raising concerns about their well-being (Külcür et al., 2024; Mitić, 2022). According to Marini and Meschitti (2018) and Archer (2021), ECRs frequently have limited career prospects, high employment insecurity, and face multiple challenges when attempting to transition to permanent academic positions in various HE systems. Their career success depends to a great extent on the availability of and access to funding, networking, and mentorship (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013; Grundy, 2023; Woolston, 2019), as well as on factors such as publication records and the ability to attract resources—a dynamic that is deeply influenced by national funding policies and institutional strategies.

ECRs are more likely to encounter difficulties obtaining research funding and building their publication careers, compared to senior researchers (Howe-Walsh & Turnock, 2016; Lee & Bozeman, 2005). Further, the literature indicates that ECRs report elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to factors such as heavy workloads and prolonged work hours (e.g., Biron et al., 2008; Levecque et al., 2017; Woolston, 2019), job insecurity (e.g., Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Menard & Shinton, 2022; Niemann & Dovidio, 2005), and lack of institutional support (e.g., Niemann & Dovidio, 2005). The aforementioned factors contribute to an array of additional concerns, including intense competition, well-being and mental health issues, imposter syndrome (Addison et al., 2022; Cureton, 2023; Petersen et al., 2012; Shen, 2015), and intersectional burdens (Zheng, 2018).

Studies also show that persistent gender imbalances, diversity challenges, and biases affect the experiences and career trajectories of ECRs and contribute to an oppressive environment (Kaatz et al., 2016; Rørstad & Aksnes, 2015); these factors are compounded by postcolonial or intersectional issues (Blell et al., 2022). Intersectional research examines the unique challenges faced by ECRs, including challenges and disparities specific to gender roles, underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, and other marginalised groups (Acker, 2006; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Castelló et al., 2017; Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022; Zheng, 2018).

A number of authors point out the importance of instituting a more supportive culture for ECRs in academia (Kent et al., 2022; Saltmarsh & Matthew, 2011). From a different perspective, some scholars argue that the emphasis should be laid on skills development in teaching, fund applications, career planning, project writing, and management, which are perceived as crucial for ECRs' career development (Hancock et al., 2013; Hemmings & Kay, 2016; Laudel & Gläser, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018).

To address these challenges, studies have shown the need for enhanced institutional support (Guthrie et al., 2017), including the involvement of peers and supervisors, and the co-development of individual coping strategies with line managers to address work-life balance issues and gender-related imbalances (Bailyn, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2020; Müller, 2014; Sala et al., 2019). Effective institutional support would also entail adequate representation of ECR voices across the institution, which is not always the case in HE contexts.

3. University Governance and Representation of ECRs in University Decision-Making

One of the ways to address the challenges faced by the ECRs is to ensure the representation of their needs in university decision-making and ensure their voices are heard. The reforms of HE governance in the past decades have been important in this regard (Austin & Jones, 2025; De Boer et al., 2008; Locke et al., 2011; Marginson, 2010; Shattock et al., 2024). They have transformed the key structures of university internal governance, such as university boards and senates, and led to more centralised university decision-making (Antonowicz & Jones, 2024; Bleiklie et al., 2017; De Boer et al., 2008). It has been argued that, over the past decades, the collegial form of governance has been challenged by the more bureaucratic, rationalised forms of governance of HE (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023).

The power of various stakeholders in university decision-making bodies, such as boards and senates, has increased as part and parcel of these reforms, albeit to different degrees and paces across various HE systems (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002; Austin & Jones, 2025; Klemenčič, 2012; Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2013; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015). Shin (2015), for instance, identified four different types of HE

governance systems based on a comparative study of stakeholders' influence on universities in 19 systems: shared governance (e.g., Italy, Finland), managerial governance, (e.g., Portugal), hierarchical governance (e.g., Mexico), and semi-hierarchical governance (e.g., Germany) (Shin, 2015). Here, historical, policy, legal, and cultural factors have played an important role as shown in selected examples in Supplementary File 2.

We can observe that students as stakeholders are represented and involved in university governance bodies at European universities (Klemenčič, 2012; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015). However, we have limited knowledge of the representation of ECRs in university decision-making (Leišytė, 2024; Papaioannou, 2024). The expectation is that ECRs being at the lower hierarchical levels of the academic career ladders will have limited representation and voice (Smith & Jones, 2020).

The representation of ECRs in university governing bodies is a critical issue in HE governance (Renn, 2019; Smith & Jones, 2020). Despite being an important part of the academic community, ECRs are often underrepresented in leadership positions within decision-making bodies (Johnson, 2019). This underrepresentation is also observed by the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc, 2020), which found that ECRs lack formal roles in university decision-making bodies. Jamali et al. (2023) have identified ECRs as the most vulnerable group within the academic ecosystem. Although some progress has been made in increasing ECRs' participation in decision-making bodies, there is still much work to be done (Eurodoc, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2020).

This lack of ECRs' representation is often attributed to the centralized power structure within universities, where senior academics and permanent administrative personnel hold the most influence (Austin & Jones, 2025). This concentration of power at the top often excludes ECRs from key decision-making bodies such as the Senate or the Rectorate. While ECRs could be involved in formal leadership processes, they are more commonly found in less formal committees (Brami et al., 2023).

Further, the limited representation of ECRs can be related to the prevalent gatekeeping practices in universities that exacerbate power imbalances (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). Senior academics act as gatekeepers within universities, limiting ECRs' ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making bodies (Thornton, 2013). ECRs are also often overwhelmed with numerous responsibilities and face precarious working contracts, which further discourage their involvement in academic committee work (Rajan et al., 2021).

Thus, addressing ECRs' representation in the university decision-making bodies is argued to be crucial to ensure an inclusive and effective governance within HEIs (Smith & Jones, 2020). Only by understanding the challenges and the opportunities that the ECRs are facing, the universities would be able to create a stronger and more competitive academic community (Johnson, 2019).

4. Theoretical Framing

We are concerned with the agency of ECRs in university decision-making. By "agency," we understand "a matter of capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 196). To understand the agency of ECRs in university decision-making, we turn to the stakeholder theory, as it has proven useful in understanding the power of various stakeholders in

HE, which enables the capacity to act, that is to exert agency (Freeman, 1984). According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organisation's objectives" (p. 46). Accordingly, Freeman (1984) defines stakeholder theory as "the principle of who or what really counts." The term "stake" can be simply described as a share, interest, or investment that a certain party lay claim to in an entity. This "stakeholder" definition was framed in the move away from a theory of strategic planning to one of strategic management, in which organisations must actively manage relationships with stakeholder groups (Freeman, 2010, p. 53). Identifying relevant stakeholders and managing the corresponding relationships is a significant task, as certain stakeholder groups may be able to prevent the success of an organisation (Freeman, 2010). Moreover, while the prevention of damage to the organisation is a key benefit, stakeholder management can also yield significant benefits for organisations. For example, successfully managing the relationship with employees can lead to a lower turnover rate (Hillman & Keim, 2001, p. 126).

Mitchell et al. (1997) have developed a typology to explain what makes managers prioritise certain stakeholder relationships over others. Their typology employs three criteria to identify the relative importance of stakeholder groups and interests, which go into creating a stakeholder hierarchy. The ordering builds on stakeholder salience, defined tautologically as "the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 868). In order to investigate which stakeholders are most salient, meaning that their interests enjoy the highest priority, the authors used the three criteria of power, legitimacy, and urgency. A party has power in a relationship "to the extent that it can gain access to coercive, utilitarian or normative means" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 865) to impose its will. Legitimacy is described as "socially accepted and expected behaviour" (p. 866), which establishes an actor's authority. Urgency, which adds the dynamic component, is defined as "the degree to which a stakeholder claims call for immediate attention" (p. 867).

As shown by Freeman (2010, p. 55), in the case of a large organisation, the stakeholders may be members of the organisation, such as employees. Amaral and Magalhaes (2002, p. 2), referring to Freeman's stakeholder theory, distinguish between internal and external stakeholders in HE. External stakeholders are defined as representatives of interests from the outside world, such as industry partners of the university and potential future employers; their participation is intended to ensure the consideration of external demands and trends in the governance bodies of the university (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002). Academic staff, students, and non-academic staff, such as technical and administrative staff, are categorised as internal stakeholders (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002). As argued by Jongbloed et al. (2008), in the context of NPM reforms, HEIs are increasingly expected to engage with relevant stakeholder groups, as they become accountable, effective, and efficient organisations that aim to provide quality HE.

Since stakeholder roles have been redefined under the NPM, ECRs will here be perceived as stakeholders forming a subset of the academic staff stakeholder group. To understand the power of ECRs as stakeholders, we will be following Mitchell et al. (1997) in drawing on the notions of legitimacy, power, and urgency in HE settings (Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2014). Previous studies of students' roles in decision-making in HEIs have identified them as increasingly important stakeholders, especially from the point of view of policymakers, managers, and academics (Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2013; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015), as students have a say—through legitimacy, urgency, and, sometimes, power—in quality assurance processes and programme development, in different European HE contexts. As noted by Leišytė and Westerheijden (2014, p. 84),

adapting Mitchell's criteria: "The power of a higher education stakeholder could be veto power in committees associated with educational quality." They define "legitimacy" as behaviour following "the well-established norms of the academic community and participation in collegial governance bodies of HEIs as defined in laws and regulations" (p. 84). Finally, the urgency of a HE stakeholder can be understood as "their presence and participation in meetings, putting forward proposals and comments, following up on actions and getting their points of view accepted by other stakeholders" (p. 84).

Overall, therefore, three main stakeholder groups with different levels of stakeholder salience can be identified in terms of Mitchell et al.'s (1997) typology, depending on the presence and absence of the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency: latent, expectant, and definitive stakeholders. *Latent* stakeholders have one of the three attributes following Mitchell et al. (1997). *Expectant* stakeholders would have two of the three attributes. Finally, *definitive* stakeholders possess all three attributes.

Formally, ECRs can belong to any of the above types of stakeholders, based on how university management perceives their power, legitimacy, and urgency regarding a particular organisational policy issue. It may be that their power may differ according to the area, since some policy issues could be strategic institutional priorities for the superiors or university managers, who may therefore need to rally the support of different members of academic staff. This may especially be the case in more collegially oriented HE institutions and systems. Furthermore, ECRs may have more legitimacy to claim expertise in particular areas, for instance, in relation to doctoral education. ECRs who are elected representatives in formal decision-making bodies would be likely to have the legitimacy to voice their concerns and represent their colleagues in those bodies. Here, "voice" is defined as "all of the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say about, and influence, their work and the functioning of their organisation" (Wilkinson et al., 2020, p. 1). Della Torre et al. (2022) argue that one needs to distinguish between direct voice channels, through which employees have the opportunity to express their opinions directly to managers, and indirect voice channels, through which employee voice is expressed by elected representatives. Accordingly, the current study includes the voices of individual ECRs as well as of elected representatives. Della Torre et al. (2022) further note that both formal and informal communication channels are important for voicing employee concerns; with this in mind, we pay attention to both types of communication channels used by ECRs.

5. Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data collected from case study universities in seven countries (Germany, Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, Lithuania, Türkiye, Israel). The country selection was based on variation in terms of cultural power distances and in terms of HE governance models (De Boer et al., 2008; Hofstede, 2015; Shin, 2015). The level of managerialism following NPM reforms differs across the selected HE systems, with Lithuania, Israel, Cyprus, and Portugal representing the managerial governance model, Germany representing the semi-hierarchical governance model, and Türkiye representing the hierarchical governance model (see Supplementary File 2). Further differentiation among the selected countries relates to their place on the cultural power distance index designed by Hofstede (2015), with Croatia (73) and Türkiye (66) being high on the power distance index, followed by Portugal (63), and other countries being on the lower side, like Lithuania (42), Germany (35), and Israel (13). The cultural differences in power distance were deemed to be important for understanding the hierarchical power relations between employees and managers in organisational environments, with high power distance cultures assumed to be less open to

inclusive governance approaches and to hearing the voices of lower hierarchical levels in organisations (Białas, 2009).

In each of the countries studied, a research-intensive doctoral-granting university was selected as a case study, also taking into account disciplinary breadth encompassing "hard" and "soft" sciences, since disciplinary range is important for understanding different research cultures and disciplinary hierarchies. These may, in turn, have an impact on ECRs' influence in decision-making. This selection allowed for a comparative analysis across countries while ensuring diversity in terms of national HE contexts. The data collection was carried out under the auspices of Working Group 2 of the COST Action VOICES project, following the research design developed by the methodology sub-group. The data collection guidelines and the interview schedules were developed for ECRs and managers/administrators and tested in the English language; they were then discussed in two meetings of the methodology group, before being piloted and revised to ensure their applicability to different national contexts. For the data collection, the interviewers in different countries translated the interview instruments into their own language. Each of the interviewees filled out a consent form and was informed about the project and data usage. Their participation was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

In each of the case study institutions, the composition of main decision-making bodies—such as senates, university councils, and faculty councils—was examined with a focus on ECRs' representation and their diversity in terms of their gender and discipline. The data helped to identify potential interviewees. In each institution, six to eight purposefully selected ECRs were interviewed. We selected two types of ECRs: those who were involved in institutional decision-making, such as being representatives of ECRs in university senates or faculty councils, and those ECRs who have not been actively engaged in representative roles. We also made sure that we included representatives of soft and hard sciences, to reflect different disciplinary cultures (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Additionally, two to three managers and HR administrators at the central and faculty levels were interviewed from each institution. These interviews sought to draw out their points of view to understand to what extent their institutions put forward policies and enact them to ensure inclusive decision-making and address the needs of ECRs at all levels, and how they perceive the power, urgency, and legitimacy of ECRs. In this way, 55 semi-structured interviews with ECRs and 14 with managers/HR administrators were carried out in seven case study institutions in 2023–2024.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face and online based on what was convenient for the interviewees. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded when this was agreed to. All interviewees were asked to sign the consent form, indicating the purposes of the research and ensuring the confidentiality and voluntary nature of the interview. The interviews were de-identified and collected in one central database to ensure a systematic analysis. All the interviews were manually transcribed and each of the interviewers summarised their case studies to ensure that the contextual information was included. To discuss and corroborate findings, two data-sharing and discussion meetings were held among the interviewers.

In this article, we analyse the representation of ECRs and their power, urgency, and legitimacy across different types and levels of formal decision-making bodies of HEIs: the central-level main board or senate and committees; faculty/school-level council and formal committees; and departmental-level boards or similar decision-making bodies. The analysis also highlights the informal ways in which ECRs' voices are heard and are thus able to influence their universities.

We operationalise ECRs as having power in decision-making when this is manifested in their ability to influence structural change or content of work, or to veto proposed change either through formal or informal voicing of their concerns. Having power vis-a-vis managers means that ECRs have the agency to influence decision-making. Further, the legitimacy of ECRs could be observed in the extent to which they were formally represented as a particular group of employees in decision-making bodies at different levels of the university regarding teaching, research, or administration—in other words, is their representation formally defined in laws and regulations? Since the various EU soft regulations foresee the representation of ECRs and their inclusion in decision-making, this attribute is especially important.

Finally, ECRs' urgency in decision-making can be understood as the extent to which they make their claims a priority for the managers. This could be by acting through an ECR representative or individually through collegial decision-making committees. This could include participating in meetings regarding teaching, research priority-setting, defining performance evaluation criteria, improving working conditions, participating and having a say in hiring and promotion procedures, putting forward proposals and comments for improvement, and following up on actions of other stakeholders regarding the core issues pertinent to ECRs.

For case-studies comparison, a three-point scale was used to indicate the level of ECR influence in their HEIs' decision-making bodies: low, medium, and high. The rating on the scale from low to high is based on the number of respondents answering positively and providing supporting examples in answers to questions about the legitimacy, urgency, and power of ECRs. A low rating indicates no or very few respondents, a medium rating indicates several respondents, and a high rating indicates most or all respondents.

In this article, thematic analysis was used to examine the data and highlight recurring patterns or themes in the data systematically through coding and theme derivation. This method enabled us to compare respondents' views and experiences in academia. Thematic analysis is viewed as a tool that helps researchers navigate the data examination process. Interpretation of complex textual data is facilitated by thematic analysis, which adds depth and clarity. It involves familiarising oneself with the data to understand details and nuances, creating codes to capture key elements, identifying patterns and trends, refining and labelling these themes, and ultimately presenting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, as researchers, we also needed to practice reflexivity during the analysis phase, where we critically assessed how our perspectives may influence data interpretation (Terry et al., 2017). On the other hand, thematic analysis has advanced to include more complexity by integrating it into various epistemological frameworks, like realist and phenomenological perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

6. Data Analysis

The goal of our analysis is to evaluate the role of ECRs in decision-making through stakeholder categories of legitimacy, urgency, and power, as well as to compare the perspectives of ECRs and HEI managers based on the data collected in the seven-case study HEIs. For this purpose, the interview answers of ECRs and HEI managers were compared in terms of the extent to which ECRs were involved, in which issues they had a say in and drawing on specific examples of ECRs making an impact in their institution at different levels of decision-making. Several of the case study universities had ways for ECRs to be formally involved in departments, faculty, or university boards and committees through elected or appointed representatives.

However, the interviewed ECRs observed that senior academics are often the ones making real decisions, discouraging ECRs from challenging established hierarchies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Perceived formal influence of ECRs in university decision-making per case study HEI.

Decision-making body	How much legitimacy do ECRs have to influence change?	How much power do ECRs have to influence change?	How much urgency do ECRs have to influence change?
University councils, senates, or similar			
Low	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
Medium	—	—	—
High	—	—	—
Faculty, school, institute board, or similar			
Low	CYHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, LTHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
Medium	CRHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI	—	LTHEI, DEHEI
High	—	—	—
Faculty-level committees (e.g., education, research)			
Low	CYHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CYHEI
Medium	CRHEI, DEHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	—	CRHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
High	ISRHEI	—	—
Department/research unit body (e.g., Departmental Board)			
Low	—	CYHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	—
Medium	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, TRHEI, PTHEI	CRHEI DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
High	LTHEI	—	LTHEI

Notes: Case studies are presented alphabetically within the same category: CRHEI—the case study HEI in Croatia; CYHEI—the case study HEI in Cyprus; DEHEI—the case study HEI in Germany; ISRHEI—the case study HEI in Israel; LTHEI—the case study HEI in Lithuania; PTEHEI—the case study HEI in Portugal; TRHEI—the case study HEI in Türkiye. Source: Based on interview data.

7. Legitimacy

The legitimacy of the ECRs' involvement was determined by the extent to which they were formally represented in their HEIs (senates, assemblies, councils, boards, committees, etc.). For all country cases

studied, it was evident that the degree of legitimacy diminishes as the level of the decision-making body increases.

The heterogeneity of the ECRs in different institutions led to ECRs oftentimes being the least vocal members of their HEIs and having very low legitimacy. There was a lack of communication and contact between different sub-groups of ECRs, even though their struggles and challenges might be shared. ECR6 from Lithuania stated that "ECRs are often used to working alone, doing their research alone," and yet "commonality and social aspects are crucial to having your voice heard and to having a strong and equal presence in the decision-making process." In contrast, university students usually have organised communities and representation systems, with elected student presidents and representatives in formal university governance structures. The lack of established ECR communities hinders their legitimacy in decision-making when compared to university students. None of the interviewed ECRs from any of the countries studied claimed that they felt truly represented at the top level of university governance.

Several ECRs complained of a lack of access to central administration and a lack of voice in discussions and decisions related to top-level university governance. ECRs seem to have low formal and informal legitimacy, sometimes due to "lack of communication channels, as well as an overly administrative approach through numerous written requests" (ECR7, Croatia), as corroborated by ECR4 from Lithuania, who provided an example of trying to raise an issue of unfair undergrad student evaluation but never hearing back from the central university administration. Another issue raised by different ECRs (ECR5 from Cyprus, ECR3 from Croatia) was the fact that students (master's and bachelor's) are more formally represented, as boards and committees often have quotas for student representatives but not for ECRs. The HEI managers' interviews corroborated these insights and the assertions of ECRs concerning their representation in university governance. According to an Israeli HEI manager, governance decision-making bodies exclude ECRs, allowing them to focus on their research, and they only consult ECRs on issues that directly affect them. As a manager from Cyprus HEI concluded, "small voices are not heard" when it comes to the involvement of ECRs at the higher levels of decision-making bodies in HEIs.

At the meso level of HEI governance, ECRs generally had a higher level of legitimacy as stakeholders than they had at the central level. Many universities have policies to include doctoral students, research assistants, and other ECRs on faculty boards and committees. In the German case study HEIs, not only do ECRs have seats on the faculty council, but they also have a say in the selection process of new professors. In addition, most interviewees from Lithuanian and Croatian HEIs reported that ECRs have been allocated seats on their faculty councils and various committees. ECR inclusion is often enforced by the HEI, as emphasised by ECR7 (Israel), who is a member of her faculty committee: "I was assigned to this committee. It's not something I initiated." Personal connections matter in order to gain access to faculty committees, as noted by ECR2 (Türkiye): "ECRs are not in decision-making bodies at upper levels unless they have personal ties with them." Several Portuguese interviewees described the situation in similar terms, for example, ECR8 noted: "One needs to move in the right arenas, in the right circles, to have important friends or be seen near/with someone important." Even when ECRs gain access, it is often limited to certain committees, for example, in the case of the HEI in Türkiye, where ECRs are only allowed to participate in committees but not faculty boards, which only include department heads. The lowest observed level of legitimacy at the meso level was in the case of an HEI from Cyprus. According to interviewed ECRs from Cyprus HEI, only staff members with permanent contracts and students have seats in university and faculty decision-making

bodies; therefore, ECRs, who seldom have permanent contracts, are excluded, even if they wish to participate. ECR1 (Cyprus) stated: "I often feel invisible in the department and university. I am involved in teaching and research but am not part of any decision-making." Nevertheless, the middle level of HEI decision-making bodies is where different institutions diverged in their formal inclusion of ECRs, thus in the legitimacy of ECRs at this level of representation. The case study HEIs from Germany, Croatia, Lithuania, and Israel had policies to encourage ECR representation at the faculty/school level, while the HEIs in Türkiye, Portugal, and Cyprus were less inclusive, especially when it came to the main faculty-governing bodies.

The department or research unit level of HEI decision-making is where ECRs tended to be involved the most across most of the case study HEIs. The Lithuanian case stands out, with both PhD students and ECRs with more advanced careers stating their legitimate high position in decision-making. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with being included in department-level discussions and having ways to voice their concerns. ECR5 claimed that she did not feel a strong hierarchical distribution in her department and that "doctoral students are regarded as equal members of the community, and their voices are heard." A similar narrative was repeated by all Lithuanian ECRs interviewed. ECRs from all other case study HEIs generally reported being involved in departmental-level decision-making to some degree. Many stated that these discussions were usually carried out informally, with varying outcomes. For example, ECR6 from Israel claimed that only an informal approach is effective: "I feel that in order to be heard, I have to act informally and on a personal level. Then people will more likely listen to my opinions." On the other hand, this was not the case for ECR2 from Portugal: "There could be informal moments, like having a coffee or a lunch with colleagues and these issues being talked about among ECRs and some senior staff, but that doesn't mean that this will be discussed at the formal level." Examples provided by several ECRs from the case study HEIs in Croatia, Lithuania, and Cyprus showed their active involvement in departmental-level discussions on research, organisation of academic events, teaching, and study process organisation. The analysis of ECR answers to the question about their influence in the decision-making process at the lowest level reveals either a medium (in the HEIs in Germany, Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, Türkiye, and Israel) or high (in the case of Lithuania) level of legitimacy. The statements from ECRs regarding their legitimacy at the departmental level were supported by the managers' interviews. Manager 2 from the Türkiye HEI, for instance, stated that ECRs could express themselves or give their opinion on teaching schedules and other matters related to the department.

8. Power

The ability of ECRs to influence the outcome of HEI decision-making tended to be rather low in all researched universities across all seven countries. Although power in academia traditionally lies in the hands of academics, and even with the increased institutional autonomy of universities and the centralisation of power, this was limited to senior academics.

Low hierarchical positions and lack of representation in top leadership positions meant that ECRs did not have power at the top level of HEI decision-making (see Table 1). Lack of power was found also at the faculty/institute level, due to the low formal representation of ECRs in faculty decision-making bodies and the fact that "professors outnumber ECRs in decision-making bodies," as mentioned by ECR1 in Germany. Additionally, when decisions were made, "professors and other higher-ranking positions have first…say" also due to the low hierarchical position of ECRs (ECR5, Türkiye) and the precarity of ECRs' working conditions,

as confirmed by several ECRs. The only case where ECRs have some, albeit still rather limited, power is at the lowest level of governance, the departmental level, although the situation varies greatly among the case study HEIs in the seven countries. For example, ECRs had a degree of power in the case study of HEIs in Lithuania, Germany, Croatia, and Israel. However, many ECRs emphasised that this power was attained on informal grounds, by sharing their concerns with their supervisors/mentors and raising the specific issue at the departmental level through the supervisor (ECR6, Croatia) or "going to heads of institutes, departments, etc. and talking directly to them" (ECR2, Lithuania). Several ECRs emphasised that they had informal power due to the fact that departmental communities are rather small, so they freely participated in departmental discussions. Yet, there were also ECRs who stated that "some ECRs can feel that they should not express their opinion before obtaining a PhD" (ECR4, Croatia), although this is not a formal requirement. ECR power at the lowest level tended to be polarised in different country contexts, as ECRs in the case study HEIs in Türkiye, Cyprus, and Portugal generally had low power even at the departmental level. In cases where these ECRs could express their opinions, they were not attended to (ECR8, Türkiye) or they were afraid to speak at departmental meetings "due to job insecurity or fear of being bullied" (ECR3, Cyprus). As stated by several ECRs at the lowest level, ECR power greatly depended upon supportive leadership from departmental heads (ECR5 and ECR7, Portugal).

ECRs' statements regarding the power they had at the different levels of HEI governance were confirmed by the managers' interviews. The majority of managers mentioned that at the highest level of HEI governance, there was very low representation of ECRs and no possibility for them to have power in the decision-making process. More specifically, the two managers from the HEI in Cyprus stated that ECRs have no power at the highest level of the HEI, and they can only give their opinion informally to their PhD mentors, who may raise the issue if they so decide. A manager from an HEI in Türkiye highlighted the valuable role that ECRs can play in shaping institutional decisions. He pointed out that ECRs often bring fresh perspectives and are more attuned to emerging technologies, making them instrumental in driving innovation. Unlike senior academics who may be more accustomed to established structures and traditional methods, ECRs frequently engage with contemporary research trends, digital tools, and interdisciplinary approaches. Their adaptability and proactive engagement allow them to influence institutional developments, even in the absence of formal decision-making power. As an example, he recalled an instance where ECRs were actively involved in shaping the university's online educational infrastructure. This illustrates how ECRs, despite their relatively junior positions, can have some degree of informal power, that is: agency in shaping HE institutions. While formal power provides the structural framework for decision-making, informal power allows for flexibility, adaptability, and the introduction of innovative perspectives. Through their expertise, advocacy, and ability to bridge the gap between emerging trends and institutional policies, ECRs can serve as catalysts for meaningful change and long-term institutional advancements.

9. Urgency

The present study shows that some HEIs often have regulations and policies for the formal inclusion of ECRs in their governance processes; however, whether this inclusion is meaningful or not is a separate issue. The validity of ECR participation and their actual ability to use their voice in decision-making, as well as the extent to which ECR claims receive immediate attention, is defined by the stakeholder category of urgency (see Table 1).

The lack of representation at the top level of university governance structures, such as senates, assemblies, and committees, excludes the expression of ECRs' opinions and denies their critical importance in discussions and votes. Many of our ECR respondents, from all case study HEIs, in all seven countries, declared their struggle to have any say in university matters and emphasised the delays in attending to their claims. Several ECRs mentioned lengthy processes for expressing their voices as they needed to receive approval at the lower level, before even trying to appeal to the highest level. As stated by ECR6 from Croatia: "If there is such a need, it is communicated with your mentor informally and presented firstly at the Department Council, then at the Faculty Council, and finally at the University Council." In addition, ECR7 from Cyprus emphasised:

> There is a 40% chance of having our opinions heard at the departmental level, and this percentage declines as we move higher up. Even though we have views that we communicate to the department, I fear these are distorted or even lost the higher we move up the university decision-making ladder.

Very few cases of immediate response to ECRs' claims and concerns were recalled by the interviewees, one being a doctoral student from Lithuania (ECR5), who provided an example of initiating a discussion with the doctoral administrative department at the central university administration, where the Lithuanian ECR raised an issue regarding graduation requirements. Another example came from ECR8 from Cyprus, who had a permanent position as a lecturer and had the possibility to participate in actions that had immediate effect due to their formal inclusion in a committee: "I am a faculty representative at the Equality Committee, and as a member, I'm involved in the development and application of equality, inclusion, and diversity practices across the university." These few cases, although encouraging, do not reflect the situation of the majority of ECRs, as most interviewees could not provide any examples where their voices received immediate attention and drew a reaction from upper echelons; therefore, we conclude that the level of urgency of ECRs as stakeholders at this level is low for all analysed HEIs. When it comes to the level of urgency that ECRs have at the top level of HEIs, the managers who were interviewed responded that ECRs are consulted more at an informal level and they have to follow the hierarchical structure if they want their matter to be discussed at a higher level; this confirms their low stakeholder urgency.

At the middle level of HEI governance, the degree of urgency attached to ECRs varies depending on whether they are representatives in these bodies or if they know someone who is a representative. Lithuanian and German cases stand out once again as having a substantial level of ECR influence on the main faculty boards and councils. Interviewees from both countries expressed confidence in their ability to participate in and lead discussions and provided several examples when their claims resulted in timely changes in areas such as teaching, programme curriculum, remote work, language of communication, and organisation of doctoral studies. ECR2 from the Lithuanian HEI, who is a doctoral student representative in the research centre's council, explained that her voice was always heard when questions concerning PhD issues were discussed and her opinion was sometimes valued above those of other members of the council in these discussions. In the case of HEIs in Croatia and Israel on the other hand, which reported a high level of legitimacy in meso-level governance, a different situation was revealed when it came to urgency. ECR3 from Croatia, who represents assistants in the faculty council, explained her situation: "I would not say that our voice is heard. We find out about decisions that have been reached at department meetings, or during faculty council"—indicating that, despite legitimacy, ECRs' voices are not considered critical or as needing immediate attention. In the case of the HEI in Israel, the interviewed ECRs commented that they sometimes perceive their participation as not being worth the investment, as ECR3 stated: "Participating in the committee is not

rewarding. Being a member of the committee cannot be considered as an opportunity to influence, in a system which doesn't remunerate. I regard it as a burden." A similar situation was observed in the case of the HEI in Türkiye, where ECRs participated in various committees but only did bureaucratic and tedious tasks of no critical importance. ECR7, who is on several committees, explained that research assistants are asked to do tedious work; for example, they were asked to transport people for a symposium. This was corroborated by ECR2: "We are not asked. We just implement decisions." A manager from the HEI in Türkiye corroborated this and added that sometimes ECRs are appointed to various committees as they are more likely to be more obedient and would follow the orders of the management committee due to their perceived sense of inferiority. ECRs from Portugal also declared their inability to attract any attention in faculty-level boards and committees; and the case of Cyprus stands out, because ECRs did not have any representation at this level, therefore all participation was strictly informal. Although many ECRs who were representatives in their HEIs' decision-making bodies noted their ability to put forward ideas, participate in discussions, and express their ideas, several of them also mentioned that young researchers are often afraid to speak up or argue with senior staff members. According to ECR3 from Germany: "As an early career researcher, you want to complete your studies, so any intense conflict would be avoided." ECR8 from Israel elaborated: "I want to get tenure, and I don't want to fight with anyone." Another issue, presented by several ECRs, was that even though they participated in board meetings, they were not invited to informal and unofficial meetings, which clearly indicates that this stakeholder group is not considered of critical importance and has limited possibilities to put forward their concerns.

Therefore, as corroborated by nearly all interviewees, the best way to raise issues and receive immediate attention was through informal communication with their supervisor or other senior and influential staff members. The importance of informal communication between ECRs and their mentors and heads of departments was supported by the managers' interviews. A manager from the HEI in Israel stated: "In the case of an informal suggestion that is not in the agenda some young researchers participate in the discussion."

The present study reveals that at the lowest level of governance, the urgency of ECRs is similar in degree to their power, as discussed previously. ECRs tended to be active participants in departmental level discussions and their ideas were taken into account. The Lithuanian case again stands out as having the highest level of ECR influence on decision-making. An example was provided by Lithuanian ECR1: "Since the department is small, everyone's voice is heard, and good ideas are often implemented. Sometimes small changes are even implemented without any deliberation." Many other ECRs from all countries described ECRs as being accepted, supported, and included in the decision-making process to either a medium or a high degree. However, the issues on which ECRs were usually consulted appear to be rather limited. The main discussions in which ECRs participated concerned research, day-to-day functioning of their research units, events, purchases, teaching, and student supervision.

To gain a complete view of ECRs' agency in institutional decision-making, this study included ECRs who actively participate in various representative roles and ECRs who do not. In addition, representatives of different research fields (soft and hard sciences) were interviewed to represent different disciplinary cultures. From our findings, it can be concluded that the formal participation of ECRs in senates, committees, boards, etc., correlates with higher legitimacy, power, and urgency, especially at higher levels of HEI governance. It is clear that a seat in such bodies grants more opportunities to formally put forward ideas and

gain immediate attention and support. When it comes to the inclusion of ECRs at the departmental level of decision-making, the formal representation is less crucial, as many interviewees reported rather similar levels of influence at this level, regardless of their representation status. No significant correlation between the disciplinary field and the reported role of ECRs in decision-making was observed, pointing to the importance of organisational hierarchical structures, rather than disciplinary hierarchies.

10. Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to examine the role that ECRs play in university decision-making bodies across seven studied countries in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Drawing upon stakeholder theory, we evaluated the agency that ECRs hold as internal stakeholders in HEIs, which represents a neglected topic in the literature to date.

Overall, the study found that there is variation among the studied HEIs in terms of the formal representation and informal influence of ECRs. In the majority of the universities studied, ECRs are not well-represented at central university level and/or faculty level decision-making bodies. The absence of formal representation and structured communication channels enabling ECRs to voice concerns implies that ECRs are limited in their ability to influence decisions—that is, to be agents of change through representation and formal channels. Rather, their voice is heard in informal ways and mainly in relation to educational issues and teaching rather than research. Therefore, structural changes (e.g., setting formal quotas for ECRs in decision-making bodies) may not solve the problem, as cultural changes are also needed.

In terms of the dimensions of stakeholder theory, it appears that ECRs have low legitimacy in central university decision-making bodies and maintain low power across all levels of university governance, whereas the urgency of their interests is often marginalised at higher levels of university decision-making. On the other hand, ECRs can exercise legitimacy and sometimes urgency through informal channels and personal liaison with senior academics; yet their power remains limited even at the departmental level due to the hierarchical structures present at universities. These structures prioritise senior researchers' interests, and it seems they have not changed much despite the calls for increasing stakeholder involvement, centralisation, and professionalisation of university management due to NPM reforms. Here it is also interesting to observe, that despite the NPM reforms, which have increased managerial oversight of academic work, senior academics remain powerful in decision-making, albeit to varying degrees in different studied institutional contexts. This is in line with Marquina's (2024) observation that academic oligarchy can be co-opted by the policy circles and managers, with senior academics asserting power also in the managerial systems.

Comparing the views of ECRs and managers on the levels of legitimacy, power, and urgency reveals discrepancies, but also an overlap in statements from the perspectives of ECRs and managers, leading to the conclusion that changes are needed to strengthen ECRs as a stakeholder group. ECRs should be given better representation at the different levels of HEIs and the opportunity to express their voice and influence the process of decision-making. With low formal legitimacy, ECRs rely on informal channels, e.g., the informal power they have at the departmental level through their supervisors and more senior staff. Even in cases where legitimacy exists as a consequence of the system of representation, ECRs are represented in small numbers which weakens their power and interest in decision-making. Yet, the lack of ECRs' participation in

decision-making is not something that the interviewed HEI managers find dubious, as some mentioned a lack of interest from ECRs, lack of experience and qualifications, and their dedication to research, which implies limited time for committee work.

Our findings suggest that ECRs seem to be, at best, latent stakeholders at the central university level in most of the HEIs studied here; while at the lower levels of hierarchy they become expectant stakeholders and, in the case of the Lithuanian HEI, definitive stakeholders at the departmental level. The dominance of senior faculty and the insufficient formal representation of ECRs in decision-making bodies implies that they are limited in their ability to influence change in HEIs and academia in general. In order to foster a more inclusive university environment, both structural and cultural reforms are necessary to enhance ECR representation at higher organisational levels and to ensure that their voices are meaningfully integrated into governance discussions at all university levels. Given the differences between case study HEIs in different countries, one can see that low power distance countries allow for more representation and participation of ECRs at the lower hierarchical levels, compared to those HEIs in high power distance countries. Informal influence seems to be the key mechanism open to ECRs, irrespective of the governance model. The managerial governance model with top-down decision-making seems to include more representation of ECRs in the formal decision-making structures. At the same time, universities continue to be a specific type of organisation where academic oligarchy and academic hierarchies continue to play a very important role, and opening up university governance to various stakeholder groups is not a linear and straightforward process.

Addressing the structural, hierarchical, and cultural challenges is essential for recognising and appreciating the contributions of ECRs in shaping HE. Our findings suggest that more space should be made for ECRs' voices in formal decision-making governance settings and that their role as definitive stakeholders in HE be recognised across all levels of the university. Representation of different academic career groups when raising questions, discussing, and making decisions not only raises issues relevant to each group, but also contributes to the health of the institution itself by increasing the diversity of viewpoints on the issue under consideration. Unlike students, ECRs do not always have organisations that unite them and represent their interests within HEIs. Thus, we recommend: (a) creating a more widespread system for formal representation of ECRs in various committees at multiple levels of HEIs, in which representation is remunerated or otherwise acknowledged by the institution, (b) creating dedicated advisory roles for ECRs on research/teaching-related issues, (c) creating safe spaces for ECRs to discuss and voice their concerns informally across departments while building networks, (d) raising awareness among university senior academics and managers about the importance of incorporating ECR views in organisational innovation, and (e) monitoring the inclusion of ECRs in institutional decision-making bodies by gender and discipline.

Based on the above findings, several avenues for further research can be proposed. For example, future research may also explore strategies encouraging the empowerment of ECRs in relation to university governance. In addition to ECRs' voices, the perceptions of senior academics may be sought to examine how these influence attitudes towards ECR involvement in decision-making. Understanding these dynamics could inform strategies to bridge the gap between career stages and improve policymaking regarding ECRs' active participation in HE governance. Lastly, further research could investigate the interaction between ECR engagement in university governance and academic job (or study programme) satisfaction, as insights from this line of research could lead to better academic environments.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The data has not been made publicly accessible in order to protect the respondents' anonymity.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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