

Early career researchers' identity: A qualitative review

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Abstract

In recent decades, higher education has witnessed the development of a series of policies aimed at improving its quality. To this end, accountability measures have been promoted, which are having a major impact on academics. In addition, the precariousness of work in this professional sector is contributing to emphasise its consequences. In this context, early career researchers have become a highly vulnerable group, as the pretence of wanting to be part of the academic world is becoming an increasingly challenging purpose. This systematic review of the literature aims to collect and systematise the most relevant contributions on the impact that this situation has on the professional identity of young academics. To this end, a bibliographic search was carried out in four different databases (*Web of Science*, *Scopus*, *Education Resources Information Center*, *Google Scholar*), which yielded a total of 24 articles published in international journals. The results show how the political-economic measures that currently surround higher education are contributing to the development of a new neoliberal academic subject characterised by a professional identity unconsciously subjected to the system's requirements. This identity is characterised by a prioritisation of research over teaching, by the development of unethical research practices and by their impact on health and social and family relations. Finally, the need for

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more studies in this line with other approaches (longitudinal) and with more general and varied samples is emphasised.

En las últimas décadas, la enseñanza superior ha sido testigo del desarrollo de una serie de políticas destinadas a mejorar su calidad. Para ello, se han promovido medidas de rendición de cuentas, que están teniendo un gran impacto en los académicos. Además, la precariedad laboral de este sector profesional está contribuyendo a acentuar sus consecuencias. En este contexto, los investigadores noveles se han convertido en un grupo altamente vulnerable. Esta revisión sistemática de la literatura pretende recoger las aportaciones más relevantes sobre el impacto que esta situación tiene en la identidad profesional de los jóvenes académicos. Los resultados muestran cómo las medidas político-económicas que rodean actualmente a la educación superior están contribuyendo al desarrollo de un nuevo sujeto académico neoliberal caracterizado por una identidad profesional sometida inconscientemente a las exigencias del sistema.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Junior academics, commonly referred to as early career researchers (ECRs), have been a highly vulnerable figure who for quite some time have had to face a series of difficulties in the struggle to achieve a stable professional position (Castelló et al., 2015). In recent decades, this problem has been exacerbated by political-economic issues, as well as by the demands of the new knowledge society (Cantwell, 2011). These new updates have led to drastic changes in their professional identity, which has had to adjust to new demands such as global mobility, contractual instability and the compatibility of this figure with other alternative jobs in the struggle for their "survival" (Macoun & Miller, 2014). This scenario therefore warns of a situation of great vulnerability and risk for young academics that begin their professional adventure in the academy (Webber, 1947).

Against this complex background, the professional identity of this group of academics is experiencing new adversities in the development of optimal professional performance (Fransman, 2014). In fact, academic and university communities project bleak expectations and continually issue limitations for the progress of this figure towards a coherent vision of Scholarship (Boeren et al., 2015). This is why the field of research on professional identity in academics is taking a priority role in educational agendas. However, the study of the impact of these political-educational spheres on novice teachers is not being sufficiently addressed (Lai & Li, 2020).

In the last two decades, Higher Education has witnessed the development of a series of policies aimed at contributing to the growth of the economy through the development of quality and excellence in this educational sector (Bermúdez-Aponte & Lasपालas, 2017; Holmes & Lindsay, 2018; Tomicic, 2019). These policy measures are underpinned by neoliberal principles: privatisation processes, acquisition of private principles, labour market and consumer orientation, competitiveness, individualisation, productivity, etc. (Brunner et al., 2019; Harland, 2009;

Luengo & Saura, 2012). As a result, the social aims and objectives of universities have begun to transform, especially affecting their teaching staff (Harland, 2009; Tomicic, 2019).

In this context, academics are continually subjected to systems of evaluation of their professional performance that determine “their quality” through quantification. Moreover, the fact that these evaluations prioritise the quantification of research activity based on the number of articles indexed in the JCR or SJR databases (Herrán & Villena, 2016), has contributed to generate a significant impact on their ways of working, their health, their social and family relationships and the configuration of their professional identity (Harris et al., 2019; McCune, 2019; Shams, 2019). If we focus on young academics, this evaluation and accountability have become indispensable for accessing and advancing in the university world (Ma & Ladisch, 2019; San Fabián, 2020). It is therefore worth noting that the new academy generates a highly competitive and individualised environment (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

On the other hand, the promotion of new types of highly precarious contracts together with the great difficulty in obtaining some stability in the university world has contributed to accentuate the impact on academics (Hemmings et al., 2013; Kerfoot & Knights, 1995; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; MacDonald et al., 2014). In this situation, young academics have become a particularly vulnerable group (Castelló et al., 2015; Macoun & Miller, 2014). Moreover, academics who are immersed in these precarious contracts are often voiceless and are rarely considered the subject of study in research on professional identity (Callagher et al., 2021). For this reason, we believe that a review of this figure is justified in order to highlight the particularities and challenges they face in such a competitive academic world.

Exploring the concept of academic identity, it is important to highlight how this identity is part of a social, continuous and transitory construction (Ricoeur, 1996). At the same time, it is constituted in a development in which not only is the identity valued for oneself (identity attributed by the researcher himself), but it is also shaped by the identity for others (how others see/consider their identity) (Dubar, 2002). Therefore, we cannot consider this identity as static over time but requires an exploration of professional trajectory and experience (Giddens, 1995). Linking this to our purpose of study, our conceptualisation of identity starts from considering holistically the identity development by which young researchers start in the world of academia and become part of a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sweitzer, 2009).

This study is part of a larger research project, which aims to investigate the identity of academics in a neo-liberal and performative environment (REF: PID2019-105631GA-I00). This scenario leads us to consider that a systematic review of the literature is necessary in order, on the one hand, to explore in depth the most relevant research on the impact that the new political-economic situation that characterises Higher Education generates in ECRs' identity. And, on the other hand, to identify and synthesise the most relevant findings, as well as to specify the political and professional implications and the future lines of research recommended by the authors of the studies in this field of research. This is why our aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main bibliometric characteristics of the studies included in this review?
2. What are the main factors, constraints and adversities that influence the professional identity of early career academics?
3. What are the main strategies developed by young academics as a result of the demands of the new neoliberal university?

2 | METHOD

This study employed a qualitative systematic review protocol (Gough et al., 2012; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This is a methodology that summarises areas of research based on an intensive literature review (Voorberg et al., 2015). According to Littell et al. (2008), this type of review stands out for the high degree of discipline,

quality and scientific rigour in the search and study selection processes. Therefore, this systematic review has used the Prisma Statement (Moher et al., 2009).

2.1 | Search procedures

The present study was initiated with the aim of identifying all the literature on the impact of the new political-economic situation that characterises Higher Education on ECRs' identity. For this purpose, first of all, three different databases were selected for different reasons. On the one hand, the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases were selected both for the quality of the studies indexed in them and for their international scope. On the other hand, the Educational Research Information Centre (ERIC) database was used for its value in the education sector. Lastly, the Google Scholar database was also used in order to look at the possible grey literature in this field of research.

Subsequently, a number of keywords were selected and combined to produce the following search equation: ("younger academic" OR "early career researcher" OR "ERCs") AND ("managerialism" OR "evaluation" OR "assessment" OR "job insecurity").

2.2 | Inclusion/exclusion criteria and study selection

In order to obtain a manageable dataset size and meet a consistent quality standard, we included in the search a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on both pragmatic and quality principles (Booth et al., 2012; Codina, 2018). In terms of thematic appropriateness, we included studies resulting from the pre-established search equation and excluded all manuscripts that did not respond to our research questions and objectives. Furthermore, we filtered the set of studies by restricting the format to journal articles and excluding mixed sources (Hallinger, 2013). Finally, we filtered out all articles covering the last decade (2010–2020) as a set time period. This last criterion was based on the fact that we were only looking for the most recent studies on this topic of study.

Figure 1 shows the entire process of identification and data collection along with the number of articles finally included in the review. This collection process followed the principles of the PRISMA statement, which sets out a proposal for improving the publication of reviews. Furthermore, it should be noted that the entire process was carried out by four different researchers in order to provide the maximum degree of rigour, consistency and objectivity.

2.3 | Data extraction and synthesis

The selected articles were then analysed in order to extract the most relevant information. To this end, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was created to store data extracted from the 24 included articles. The extracted data included author name(s), year, country or region, main topic, research purpose, research method (i.e., qualitative, quantitative or mixed method), study participants, main findings and, finally, implications for professional improvement and practice. The resulting spreadsheet contained a wealth of information on the published international literature on the impact of academia on young academics. These data represent the body of knowledge that was analysed to address the questions posed at the beginning of this manuscript. The reading and extraction of the data was conducted by four researchers as a form of peer review (Sarhou, 2016).

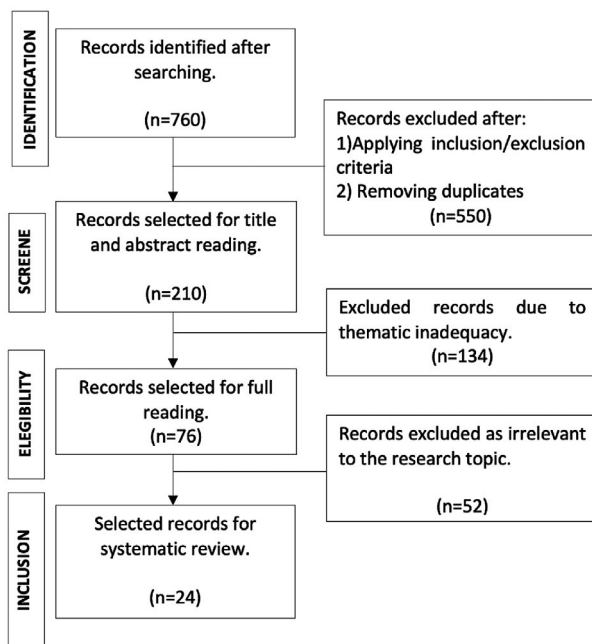


FIGURE 1 Systematic review flowchart. *Source:* Own elaboration

2.4 | Data analysis

This study sought, on the one hand, to map the dominant characteristics with respect to a particular literature, what Hallinger and Bryant (2013) call a topographical review of the literature. Secondly, to descriptively develop a systematic review of the research on this area of study (Gough, 2007).

To this end, a descriptive analysis of the main topographical characteristics of the studies included in the review was carried out first. Secondly, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the documents was carried out using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo 12. This thematic analysis was characterised by taking the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify the emerging themes that emerged from the reading of the selected studies. In this way, all the studies were entered into this qualitative software and, based on a critical reading and analysis, key themes were coded using the thematic nodes provided by the programme. In order to ensure the coherence of this coding, the categories and emerging themes were shared and agreed upon by all the researchers. The emerging themes identified by the researchers were agreed on the basis of similarity and organised hierarchically. However, due to their thematic proximity and in order to establish a coherent connecting thread, it was decided to organise all the results around a central theme.

2.5 | Limitations

The decisions made during the search and selection process of the documents may have generated certain limitations in our study. In this sense, the filters selected, the inclusion/exclusion criteria defined or the databases used may have led to the non-consideration of relevant documents for our purpose of study. Among all these, the search for documents only in Spanish or English may have generated a certain bias in the search process. Therefore, these limitations should be considered in future reviews.

3 | RESULTS

This section begins with a descriptive summary of the studies analysed in the systematic review. Firstly, an overview is given of the evolution of the scientific production over time, followed by a summary of the research contexts and designs. The second section presents an analysis of the themes emerging from the review on the impact of new forms of university work on young academics.

3.1 | General description of the studies

3.1.1 | Growth trajectory of research

In the last decade, we found a total of 24 articles on the impact of the new political-economic situation that characterises Higher Education on young academics. Among the most characteristic results of this analysis, we observe a significant increase in the number of studies from 2017 onwards. Likewise, the years 2019 and 2020 stand out for their higher incidence of publications. Table 1 shows the temporal distribution of studies in the last decade.

3.1.2 | Contexts and research designs

In relation to the geographical distribution of the studies analysed, the UK is the area with the highest scientific production in this field of study. This country has 8 studies, which represents 34% of the research included. Australia is the area with the second highest number of studies with a total of 4 articles, i.e., 17% of the total production. This is followed by Switzerland with 3 studies.

On the other hand, there are areas with less representation such as Spain, Canada, Malaysia, Finland or Zambia. Finally, there is also one article whose context covers several countries at the same time (Australia, Sweden, USA and UK). Overall, our results reveal that a significant number of studies correspond to a large extent to Anglo-Saxon countries (Table 2).

Focusing on the research designs, we highlight how 22 of the 24 included studies use a qualitative approach. The rest either use a mixed method (Hollywood et al., 2019), or do not specify the approach used (Smith, 2017). Therefore, the present review shows how qualitative methodology is the most widely used in the study of the impact that the new political-economic situation that characterises Higher Education generates on young academics.

In terms of the instruments used to collect information, semi-structured interviews (9 studies) and in-depth interviews (5 studies) are the most frequently used instruments. On the other hand, focus groups (Apreile et al., 2020), collaborative autoethnography (Caretta et al., 2018), mixed survey (Hollywood et al., 2019) and focus groups (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2015) are also employed in this field of study as information collection instruments.

3.2 | Thematic analysis

3.2.1 | The particularity of being an ECR in the new academy

Although this review comprises scientific literature from different geographical locations, many authors agree on the important impact that job insecurity, together with the continuous pressure to publish and the enormous bureaucratic burden (Acker & Webber, 2017; Apreile et al., 2020; González-Calvo et al., 2020; Osbaldiston et al., 2019; Mantai, 2019; Read & Leathwood, 2018) exert on young academics, transforming them into a figure of great vulnerability within the university system (Acker & Webber, 2017).

TABLE 1 Temporal distribution of the studies included in the review

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
0	0	0	0	Angervall and Gustafsson	Ylijoki and Henriksson	Enright and Facer	Acker and Webber	Caretta	Abrizah et al.	Apraille et al.
				1	1	1	Angervall et al.	Chipindi and Vavrus	Angervall and Silfver	Bristow et al.
							Mclean and Price	Kalfa et al.	Djerasimovic and Villani	Courtois et al.
							Smith	Read and Leathwood	Hollywood et al.	Fatimawati and Badiozaman
							Webber	4	Mantai	González-Calvo et al.
							5		Osbaldist et al.	Monereo and Liesa
									6	6

Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 2 Geographical distribution of studies

Author/Year	Country	N°
Bristow et al. (2017)	UK	8
Djerasimovic and Villani (2019)		
Enright and Facer (2016)		
Hollywood et al. (2019)		
McClean and Price (2017)		
Read and Leathwood (2018)		
Smith (2017)		
Webber (2017)		
Apreile et al. (2020)	Australia	4
Kalfa et al. (2018)		
Mantai (2019)		
Osbaldiston et al. (2019)		
Angervall and Gustafsson (2014)	Swiss	3
Angervall and Silfver (2019)		
Angervall et al. (2017)		
González-Calvo et al. (2020)	Spain	2
Monereo and Liesa (2020)		
Acker and Webber (2017)	Canada	2
Courtois et al. (2020)		
Abrizah et al. (2019)	Malaysia	2
Fatimawati and Badiozaman (2020)		
Ylijoki and Henriksson (2015)	Finland	1
Chipindi and Vavrus (2018)	Zambia	1
Caretta et al. (2018)	Various (Australia, Sweden, USA and UK)	1

Source: Own elaboration

In this context, the processes of constructing and developing the professional identity of today's young academics are continually influenced by the many challenges and complexities of the new demands of academia (Chipindi & Vavrus, 2018; Fatimawati & Badiozaman, 2020). Among these challenges, authors such as Acker and Webber (2017) and González-Calvo et al. (2020) highlight the particular impact of the rigid assessment processes to which young people are subjected in order to remain in the world of academia.

Ultimately, this situation generates the development of unstable professional identities trapped in continuous situations of ambivalence (Angervall & Gustafsson, 2014; Fatimawati & Badiozaman, 2020), which generate important identity tensions. As indicated by Apreile et al. (2020) or Bristow et al. (2017), these tensions lead to the development of coping strategies that reconfigure their professional identities towards new forms of "being an academic" with strong mercantilist and competitive connotations (Mantai, 2019).

In relation to the situations of ambivalence in which this group of academics are involved, two different types stand out. On the one hand, there are scenes of ambivalence generated by the pressure to remain both loyal to the environment and to personal aspirations at the same time (Angervall & Silfver, 2019; Apreile et al., 2020). Angervall et al. (2017) describe how young academics are in a continuous movement between satisfying department/group goals and/or prioritising their own goals and concerns.

On the other hand, Angervall and Gustafsson (2014) point to another type of ambivalent situation resulting from the internal debate generated between the researcher's conscious desire (what he/she understands he/she should do) and the unconscious (what he/she actually ends up doing). In this case, for example, the study by Caretta et al. (2018) shows how young doctoral students are more focused on scientific production (unconscious desire) than on the actual completion of the doctorate (conscious desire).

As a result of these ambivalences, high values of insecurity and uncertainty (Acker & Webber, 2017) are observed, which contribute to the development of fragile and dynamic academic identities (Hollywood et al., 2019) with a high capacity to adapt to the demands of the context (Angervall & Gustafsson, 2014). In this regard, the predominance of identities that oscillate between compliance and resistance stands out (Courtois et al., 2020; Fatimawati & Badiozaman, 2020; Kalfa et al., 2018).

Among the studies, three different types of resistance are described: critique, frontal struggle, and the pursuit of career options outside academia (Acker & Webber, 2017; Bristow et al., 2017). Among all these, Kalfa et al. (2018) highlight the search for options outside academia as the most practiced strategy. Despite this, regardless of the type of resistance, young academics show both a degree of complacency and discomfort at the same time. In this regard, for example, Chipindi and Vavrus (2018) highlight how there are young academics who criticise evaluation processes, but at the same time defend them by adding that they are necessary for accountability.

This leads to the construction of contradictory identities as they contain both elements of resistance and conformity (Bristow et al., 2017). For Acker and Webber (2017), this is essential as it demonstrates that young academics are not voluntary neoliberal subjects subordinate to the system, but that they are simply adapting in order to survive. However, Kalfa et al. (2018) note how these criticisms decline as age decreases, which shows greater levels of compliance and complicity with the new forms of academia.

On the other hand, among the survival narratives collected across the studies (Fatimawati & Badiozaman, 2020), a number of strategies stand out that impact on the professional ontology of academics and distort the true essence of academia (Chipindi & Vavrus, 2018). In this sense, young academics are aware of the enormous impact that their scientific production can have on their academic trajectory (Abrizah et al., 2019). For this reason, they place the increase in productivity as a fundamental objective of their actions, although this entails the development of a series of strategies that will be decisive in the construction of their professional identity. In this sense, the studies highlight different unethical and immoral dynamics such as publishing in predatory journals, falsification, superfluous or repetitive writing, and low levels of rigour and scientificity. Another series of practices can also be observed that contribute to the increase in publications and that are also decisive in the construction of identity. These include obtaining fundings or collaborating with the director/supervisor, the research group or with prestigious academics (Angervall & Silfver, 2019; Webber, 2017).

As Caretta et al. (2018) argues, the pressure to publish along with the strategies developed to meet the new demands of the academia is occupying the central space of ECRs' action. As a result, this group is beginning to link scholarship to scientific productivity, which impacts on the principles of universities. On the other hand, this same author also indicates how this context is impacting on their health, social and family relationships (time spent with children, parenting decisions, etc.) or emotions, among other things.

In short, all this context generates the development of a wide variety of professional identities in young academics (Enright & Facer, 2016; Monereo & Liesa, 2020) which, despite their differences, coincide in high levels of stress, anxiety and instability (Acker & Webber, 2017; González-Calvo et al., 2020; Hollywood et al., 2019; Read & Leathwood, 2018). Despite this, young academics consider this first stage in academia as essential for both their present and future careers (Mantai, 2019; Osbaldiston et al., 2019). Therefore, regardless of whether resistance strategies exist or not, this group of academics subordinates themselves to the demands of the system. For that aim, they developed all kinds of unethical strategies which are justified simply with their "love" for work or with the desire to survive and/or advance in the academy (Acker & Webber, 2017).

4 | DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study is to collect and organise the most relevant contributions on the impact on young academics (ERCs) of the new political-economic situation that characterises Higher Education. To this end, a systematic literature review was carried out using three different databases (WoS, Scopus and ERIC). After the search and the application of filters and the inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total of 24 documents were selected and subjected to a twofold analysis process. On the one hand, the main topographical characteristics of the studies were studied. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was carried out. The results described in the previous section provide a general overview of the main characteristics of the scientific production in this field of study. In the following, a number of key ideas will be highlighted and discussed with the literature.

In general terms, the main role of universities is to influence progress and social transformation. To this end, these institutions should be understood as independent, critical and free entities, at the service of the community, oriented towards the creation of critical subjects, competent professionals and knowledge (Ortega y Gasset, 1930). However, in recent decades, universities have begun to be oriented towards the principles of neoliberalism: competitiveness, market interests and logic, individualisation, performative demands, etc. (Bermúdez-Aponte & Laspalas, 2017; Brunner et al., 2019; Tomicic, 2019).

These principles have materialised in new forms of soft governance (Brøgger, 2019) based on principles of performativity (Ball, 2003) and governmentality (Foucault, 1991). In this way, subjects self-govern themselves, believing themselves to be free and taking responsibility for their own outcomes (Saura & Bolívar, 2019). In short, these new forms of political control generate a web of self-discipline and mutual surveillance (Kerfoot & Knights, 1995). In the case of university academics, this effect has been achieved thanks to the development of professional performance evaluation systems that measure their quality through quantification.

This situation quickly spread across the globe and began to define global education policy agendas (Brøgger, 2019; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). This expansion is justified by multiple authors as an attempt by different countries to develop a Higher Education capable of rivalling any university system (Balaban & Wright, 2017; Brøgger, 2019; Tomicic, 2019). For this reason, the present review shows a wide geographical variety in the investigations. This aspect not only suggests that the neoliberal influence in Higher Education is an aspect present in almost the entire planet, but also underlines the scientific world's concern for the impact that the new forms of academia may generate in young academics.

In this context, it is not surprising that there is a clear predominance of professional identities characterised by a submission to the new demands of academia. This system of self-discipline and mutual surveillance is contributing to the development of a new neoliberal academic subject (Saura & Bolívar, 2019) characterised by an important degree of "somatization of neoliberalism in their self" (p. 19) that results in a subject unconsciously subordinated to the system. As a result, we observe the abandonment of teaching in favour of research, the development of unethical and corrupt publication practices, the abandonment of social research fields, the increase of stress levels, the development of family reconciliation problems, etc. (Beall, 2017; Cannizzo, 2017; Dashper & Fletcher, 2019; Lankveld et al., 2017; Leisyte, 2015; McCune, 2019; Noll, 2019; Overac, 2019; Saura & Bolívar, 2019). For Laiho et al. (2020) Smith (2017) and Cannizzo (2017) among the main reasons for such submission lies: (1) the need to increase research output in order to be promoted in academia; (2) the normalization of the new performative demands by this group of academics. According to this review, this identity is more numerous among the youngest academics (Kalfa et al., 2018).

Moreover, all this is aggravated by situations of job insecurity (Kerfoot & Knights, 1995), transforming young academics into a particularly vulnerable group in this context (Castelló et al., 2015; Macoun & Miller, 2014). According to Saura and Bolívar (2019), the high vulnerability that young academics feel in the face of increased competition for future job security contributes to a greater submission to the new demands, even if this leads to the development of unethical or corrupt practices, or implies a significant impact on their health or social and labour relations (Beall, 2017; Cannizzo, 2017; Noll, 2019; Overac, 2019).

Given this situation, there is a need to continue with research that allows us to analyse and understand the situation of this group of academics in greater depth, as well as to promote the development of strategies and measures that contribute to alleviating this impact. Finally, it is necessary to prioritize the development of critical and reflective debates about the situation of young academics, since, ultimately, the future of the university and of science is in their hands. If no action is taken, this situation may lead to the loss of bright students who could make a significant contribution to research and knowledge (Crew, 2020), which, as a consequence, will have a direct impact on science and universities.

4.1 | Future lines of research

An extensive list of future lines of research emerges from the present literature review. At the international level, many aspects related to the study of young academics demand greater depth and learning. Thus, the authors advocate the need to develop more studies to cover international and multidisciplinary samples in order to expand and enrich the field of study of early academic careers (Abrizah et al., 2019; Abrizah et al., 2019; Courtois et al., 2020; Djerasimovic & Villani, 2019; Kalfa et al., 2018). It also emphasises the need to increase knowledge in this area of study in order to develop optimal counselling and mentoring programmes to mitigate the impact of the new demands of academia on young people (Hollywood et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Fatimawati and Badiozaman (2020) propose the development of research with a longitudinal emphasis to provide a better understanding of young academics' professional identities. Bristow et al. (2017) suggest the development of dialectical studies to delve into the resistance strategies of junior faculty. And finally, Abrizah et al. (2019) point to further research focused on analysing whether scholarly ordering practices represent a change in ECR publication behaviour over time or whether, on the contrary, they remain an essentially unchanging feature of academic life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

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