

## Early-Career Environmental Historians for a Sustainable Academia

*How can we walk the talk of sustainability on a daily basis in our working environments? How can we interpret the concept of sustainability within the academic sphere and widen its scope? How can we build more sustainable careers? This notepad reflects on the condition of early-career environmental historians in Europe and beyond, introduces visions for the field, and suggests concrete action in order to build a more inclusive academic environment.*

In 2018, the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) launched the Next Generation Action Team (NextGATe), an initiative to promote young scholars' engagement, increase their visibility, and offer a space for discussion and negotiation. The first NextGATe cohort moved forward with developing an action plan to build a network rooted in community and collaboration.<sup>1</sup> In doing so we looked at similar initiatives developed within environmental history (EH) organisations and the wider EH community, such as the New Scholars group of the Network in Canadian History & Environment (NiCHE), the Tensions of Europe (ToE) Early Career Scholars Group, and the project Environmental History Now (@envhistnow). This shows the value of offering open, interdisciplinary and community spaces for early-career scholars to share their work and expertise, and connect with each other.

In the first half of 2018, members of the Young Academy of Europe (YAE), a pan-European network of early-career researchers, conducted a survey in order to gain a better understanding of the conditions faced by researchers early in their careers. Not only did the survey examine several key career factors, such as work–life balance, tenure-track requirements and administrative workloads; it also aimed to identify key challenges (see Figure 1). The survey results have been picked up widely and with concern. The interdisciplinary journal *Nature*, for instance, commented on the outcomes being 'striking' given the impressive track record of most of the participants.<sup>2</sup>

In reference to the current global health crisis, higher education responses to the pandemic bring to the fore the vulnerability of early career researchers (ECRs) yet again. If we consider that in the United Kingdom, for instance, 54 per cent of university staff, often underrepresented scholars with heavy

1. Viktor Pál, Roberta Biasillo, Elena Kochetkova, Teyler Meredith, Simone Schleper, Erin Spinney, 'Emerging scholars in the age of uncertainty: Goals and plans of ESEH Next Generation Action Team in 2018–19', *Environment and History* 24 (4)(2018): 579–581.
2. Toma Susi, Shaul Shalvi and Mangala Srinivas, 'I'll work on it over the weekend': high workload and other pressures faced by early-career researchers', *Nature* 17 June 2019. Available online at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01914-z> (last accessed 22 May 2020).

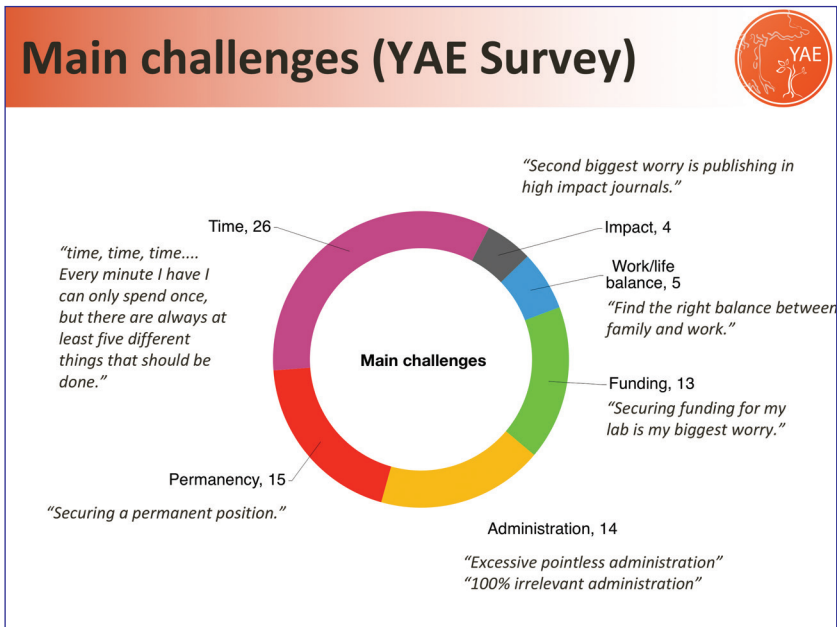


Figure 1. Key challenges identified in the YAE survey.

Source: Toma Susy, Young Academy of Europe Members + Survey 2018. Initial Analyses. © Courtesy of the author. The full analysis is available at this link: [http://yacadeuro.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/YAE\\_Survey\\_analysis.pdf](http://yacadeuro.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/YAE_Survey_analysis.pdf) Last accessed 22 May 2020.

teaching duties, are employed under some form of precarious contract, then this indeed suggests that the situation is problematic to say the least.<sup>3</sup> Several universities in the United States and the United Kingdom have decided not to resume 'normal' education in 2020/2021, leading to a large number of layoffs and increased competition for entry positions in the next academic year.<sup>4</sup>

3. University and College Union, *Precarious Work in Higher Education: A Snapshot of Insecure Contracts and Institutional Attitudes*, April 2016. Available online at [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precairous-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu\\_precariouscontract\\_hereport\\_apr16.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precairous-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariouscontract_hereport_apr16.pdf) (last accessed 22 May 2020); Stefan Collini, 'Covid-19 shows up UK universities' shameful employment practices', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2020. Available online at [https://amp.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/28/covid-19-shows-up-uk-universities-shameful-employment-practices?fbclid=IwAR0T\\_rh4Rm05ejCy9tbpVesCJLo19aX1A19GtUHyZyqby5p4EmHcq55jI](https://amp.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/28/covid-19-shows-up-uk-universities-shameful-employment-practices?fbclid=IwAR0T_rh4Rm05ejCy9tbpVesCJLo19aX1A19GtUHyZyqby5p4EmHcq55jI) (last accessed on 22 May 2020).

4. David Batty, 'Hundreds of university staff to be made redundant due to coronavirus', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2020. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/02/hundreds-of-university-staff-made-redundant-due-to-coronavirus> (last accessed on 22 May 2020).

Yet, despite this bad news, we can also see that there are initiatives that propose fairer and more collaborative solutions for the uncertain situation by which ECRs are affected across disciplines and universities. Back in 2018, for instance, Bregje van Veelen (Durham University), Richard Lane (Utrecht University) and Laura Tozer (Durham University), published the *Junior Researchers 'Good Practice' Guide*. In this document, they offered a first reflection on how junior and senior researchers can collectively work towards improving the conditions of young scholars. They also offered practical – and crucial – suggestions to address challenges faced by research assistants, PhD students, research associates and postdoctoral researchers.<sup>5</sup> Of course, there are many other examples that align with this call for more transparency and fairness in academia.

In August 2019, the ESEH conference in Tallinn provided a space for European environmental historians to reflect on these kinds of discussions. The first NextGATers – Viktor Pál, Roberta Biasillo, Elena Kochetkova, Tayler Meredith, Simone Schleper and Erin Spinney – hosted a pre-conference event that aimed to bring different generations of scholars together in conversation, find spaces for formal and informal networking and open cracks through which ECR needs and demands could be addressed. A second cohort of NextGATers was formed in May 2020 to continue and further materialise the actions first discussed in Tallinn. Members include Roberta Biasillo (EUI Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies), Elizabeth Hameeteman (Boston University), Noémi Ujházy (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest), Monique Palma (University of Lisbon) and Adam Wickberg (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm).

In the rest of this note, we identify four of the broad issues facing ECRs especially, that emerged from our conversation in Tallinn. We then propose seven actions that we support and that we would like the ESEH community to pursue in order to foster the goal of academic sustainability within our research community. In a context of environmental crisis and neoliberal academia, concepts and practices of sustainable collaboration within and outside the academic realm are worthy to be pursued and experimented with.

**Issue #1:** In the context of climate change, ECRs in environmental history and humanities are calling for a more intense dialogue with societal challenges and for a fruitful collaboration with other fields of expertise, while enriching the public discourse with history- and social science-based arguments

5. Bregje van Veelen, Richard Lane and Laura Tozer, *Junior Researchers 'Good Practice' Guide. A Discussion of the Challenges Junior Academics Face and How to (Collectively) Address Them*, 15 May 2019. Available online line at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bregje\\_Van\\_Veelen/publication/333162659\\_Junior\\_Researchers\\_'good\\_practice'\\_guide\\_A\\_discussion\\_of\\_the\\_challenges\\_junior\\_academics\\_face\\_and\\_how\\_to\\_collectively\\_address\\_them/links/5cde72f5299bf14d959f892c/Junior-Researchers-good-practice-guide-A-discussion-of-the-challenges-junior-academics-face-and-how-to-collectively-address-them.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bregje_Van_Veelen/publication/333162659_Junior_Researchers_'good_practice'_guide_A_discussion_of_the_challenges_junior_academics_face_and_how_to_collectively_address_them/links/5cde72f5299bf14d959f892c/Junior-Researchers-good-practice-guide-A-discussion-of-the-challenges-junior-academics-face-and-how-to-collectively-address-them.pdf) (last accessed on 22 May 2020).

besides science-based ones. The EH field can provide the tools and methods for historical research and data collection to explore the tensions and contradictions of the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In that regard, environmental historians who specialise, for instance, in public health and disease can offer context and insight into the work of epidemiologists, infectious disease experts and medical professionals.

**Issue #2:** This previous issue poses an ethical question concerning the ways in which we conduct our research and through what means. On the one hand, action-research methodologies, ethnographic fieldwork and community-based investigations permeate our discipline. On the other hand, the link with, and the commitment to, ideas of justice and socio-environmental sustainability demands a more open, clear and concerned approach towards our objectives, forms of engagement and sponsors. This also refers to the practicalities of academic life, specifically our carbon footprint due to networking activities.

**Issue #3:** Merging history and environment can lead us to, and derive from, multi-path developments. Moreover, given that all ECRs face the well-known bottleneck that funnels them through the academic job market, it is important to remember that our domains of interest can open up and lead us towards different professional opportunities, and that not all junior researchers necessarily aspire to academic careers. We have to discuss ways to conceive and structure our training around professional skills, and reach out to non-academic groups and organisations.

**Issue #4:** The production of knowledge and memories related to environmental transformations are contested terrains, and environment-based conflicts are increasing in number and political relevance. These assumptions have become dramatically evident in recent times. Last summer, on the occasion of the Third World Congress on Environmental History in Brazil, 120 environmental history scholars from 23 countries signed the *Florianópolis Manifesto 2019* to record their deep concern about the undermining of sound environmental policies in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> The research freedom of environmental historians is also under threat in several regions around the world and junior researchers are especially vulnerable.

Moving back to the specific role for ESEH in ensuring development of the next generation of environmental historians, we propose some actions that will immediately assist ECRs to develop skills and networks. These will provide a foundation for more effective environmental historical work in precarious times:

6. The Florianópolis Manifesto 2019 can be accessed here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Event/3rd-World-Congress-on-Environmental-History-2001927843185427/> (last accessed 22 May 2020)

## SOCIETY PAGES

**Action #1:** Establish ESEH writing groups.

**Action #2:** Implement the ESEH PhD dissertation database, and award the best thesis in EH every other year.

**Action #3:** Map research activities of early career researchers within the ESEH, stimulate collaboration and create sub-networks based on common interests.

**Action #4:** Establish remote conferences.

**Action #5:** Plan a webinar series on career development.

**Action #6:** Send out a newsletter with job postings and other relevant announcements in and out of academia relevant to environmental history.

**Action #7:** Identify ESEH members belonging to different generations willing to take part in a mentorship programme. The aim would be to strengthen the EH community by offering such peer-to-peer support.

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