CHAPTER 13

"We Shouldn't Let Academia Exhaust Ourselves Anymore!": Pandemic Practices and the Changing Psychological Contract in Twenty-First-Century Academia

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Introduction

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic at the turn of 2019–2020 shook the entire world, including academia. Some seemed to easily adjust to working and studying in lockdown conditions, while for others, locking the doors to all levels of educational institutions changed the opportunities for and relationship to work and study almost overnight. Looking back, the pandemic put universities into a position where they had to act very fast, and individuals into a position where they had to be very flexible in changing their own ways of working. The pandemic closed universities (Gourlay et al., 2021), affected conducting research (Carr et al., 2021), and took teaching online practically overnight; causing distress amongst

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academics and students alike. A Canadian STEM field survey of around 300 graduate students and postdoctoral fellows showed that closing down the laboratories was a chaotic and confusing process, caused mainly by inconsistent communication (Suart et al., 2021). Moreover, the respondents reported being distressed because of working from home, as well as concerned about future employment opportunities. An Irish survey conducted in the summer of 2020 showed that many respondents were concerned about the transition to distance work, and how their research productivity and culture were affected, as well as the intensified work (Shankar et al., 2021).

In many research settings, data collection was put on hold or moved online (Castro Superfine, 2020). For example, Kowal et al. (2021) surveyed 558 academics in the fields of biology, philosophy, and psychology from 53 countries about their attitudes and predictions regarding the pandemic and its effects on academia. The results showed that everyone had transitioned to distance work, which either made research impossible or seriously impeded. Other studies in STEM fields show similar results (e.g., Korbel & Stegle, 2020).

In all this, university actors have not been in an equal situation, as it has now become apparent that the pandemic has treated members of the academic community differently (see, e.g., Blackmore, 2020; Carr et al., 2021; Le, 2021). Amongst Kowal et al.'s (2020) respondents, nearly one-fourth was worried about their future employment in academia, and over one-fourth was expecting their financial situation to worsen. Women seemed to perceive their situation worse than men's. A survey by Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) of approximately 200 academics showed that gender, having children, the perceived threat from the virus, as well as satisfaction with one's work environment were associated with the effect of the pandemic on academic work. The daily routines of female academics who had children were disproportionately affected by the lockdown—although it should be borne in mind that the isolation caused by extensive lockdowns was not easy for anyone (Utoft, 2020).

As higher education (HE) scholars, we took this opportunity to collect interview data on academic work in exceptional circumstances from April 2020 onwards. We gradually began to question the idea that the pandemic itself would have changed the world. Instead, it seemed that the pandemic was acting as a catalyst for various ongoing developments, highlighting existing inequalities. This chapter investigates the micro-level experiences of academics in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities during

the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We consider the ways in which the human resource policies of different universities were perceived by individuals during the pandemic (c.f. Blackmore, 2020). Drawing on the concept of *academic psychological contract* (Shen, 2010) and of the notion of responsive and adaptive *pandemic practices* (Werron & Ringel, 2020), we examine how academics in Europe and North America construe their relationship with their academic work and their university (employer) and illuminate how those relationships changed during the first year of the pandemic. To do this, we formulated two research questions:

1. How do individuals describe the *responsive* and *adaptive* pandemic practices of their universities?
2. To what extent/in what ways individuals utilise the *transactional*, *relational*, and *ideological* element of the academic psychological contract when talking about their work or their own university?

To clarify, as our data focuses on the views of academics rather than universities or their administration, we do not claim to analyse the universities' practices, but rather the academics' *perceptions* of and *responses* to them. We begin the chapter by introducing our conceptual framework—the pandemic practices, as theorised by Werron and Ringel (2020) and the academic psychological contract (Shen, 2010). We then move on to describe the data and methods of our study. We then present the results of our analysis and end the chapter with a conclusive discussion.

Pandemic Practices and the Changing Psychological Contract in Universities

In this chapter, we draw on the concepts of *responsive* and *adaptive pandemic practices* (Werron & Ringel, 2020) to investigate the short-term and potential long-term changes taking place in universities. Pandemic practices refer to: "(1) social practices that (2) emerge and/or continue during the COVID-19 pandemic, are (3) related in some way or another to the discovery and spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus, and (4) can connect to each other in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Werron & Ringel, 2020, p. 57). In Werron and Ringel's conceptualisation, *responsive pandemic practices* refer to "everyday practices that adapt to the new situation" (p. 59) and in our data may refer to, for example, moving to work

and study online, and developing guidelines about when and what kind of face-to-face interactions were possible. *Adaptive pandemic practices* refer to the way in which "certain key practices may change in the long term, after the pandemic is over" (p. 60), which in our data may denote, for example, the longer-term financial and resource allocation plans of the universities after the pandemic.

To analyse these two types of social practice in the context of academia, we use the notion of *academic psychological contract* (Shen, 2010) to zoom in on the micro-level constituents of academics' relationships with their work and their university. The psychological contract has a *transactional* component, relating to pay or working hours, for example, and a *relational* component, which refers to autonomy, development, interpersonal relations, and support (Shen, 2010). Previous research (e.g., Sewpersad et al., 2019; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003) also suggests that there is an *ideological* component to the psychological contract, which refers to the employee's commitment to the "cause" or values of the organisation and which transcends economic (transactional) and socio-emotional (relational) elements. The psychological contracts have been shown to vary in relation to, for example, the person's age, gender, career stage and role, and research or teaching orientation, as well as being international or local to the context of employment (Shen, 2010) and to evolve over time (Rousseau et al., 2018). The managerialist practices in HE may have both positive (such as organisational learning) and negative (deprofessionalisation and loss of autonomy) effects on the psychological contract (Sewpersad et al., 2019).

The extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted many of the elements of the academic psychological contract around the world: working hours and mode, autonomy, ability to focus on research, interpersonal relationships and support, as well as employment contract and pay. By generating longitudinal, qualitative interview data, we were able to look at and problematise different receptions of the pandemic measures in different academic contexts and career stages.

Data and Methods

We generated the data for this study by engaging in a reflexive, multi-sited, online team ethnography. As Creese et al. (2016) have argued, working in a *team* helps overcome the challenge of a "lone researcher" and bring a broader range of perspectives into the research process. In

such a process, however, *reflexivity* is an important aspect when these potentially differing perspectives are being negotiated (Creese & Blackledge, 2012). Although such a collective process can sometimes be quite complex, it can also lead to rich interpretations of the data (Creese & Blackledge, 2012), as it forces the team members to discuss their own views and positions more carefully (see also Eisenhart, 2001).

Because of the pandemic, the entire data generation process happened *online*, except for two research team meetings in the beginning and end of the data generation period. While scarcer in HE research, online (or "virtual" or "digital") ethnographies have become more widespread in the past 15 years when studying different kinds of online interactions (Angelone, 2019; Beneito-Montagut et al., 2017). Even though online ethnography challenges the traditional notion of ethnography, where a researcher is physically "in the field", it also challenges the notion of "being", as "being online" has become a normal way to interact alongside offline interactions (Angelone, 2019). This alone adds an interesting methodological metalevel to our approach, as we had to rely on online approaches to study online practices. Technology challenged our ability to interpret, for instance, gestures, tone of voice, and so on, which are easier to acknowledge in offline interactions. Online ethnographies such as ours might, however, enable generating new types of data which is not possible in "offline ethnographies" (e.g., observing people who are on the other side of the world).

The data consist of semi-structured group interviews with three purposefully selected groups of academics, who represented different career stages and geographical locations. This means that our ethnography was not only done online, but it was also *multi-sited*—being conducted by several researchers on the same issue but in different (online) spaces (Beneito-Montagut et al., 2017). In total, we had ten interviewees. However, since we, the three authors (two established academics and one early career), also participated in the discussion during the interviews, the total participant number was 13 (see Appendix).

The *first group* "Established researchers" comprised three established academics who were based in either Europe or North America. These two regions and their academic contexts were most familiar to the authors, providing us with easy access to interviewees at short notice, as we wanted to start our data collection as the first lockdowns took place. The *second group*, "Mixed career stage", was a mixture of early-career and established researchers based at a Northern European university. The *third group*

"Early career researchers (ECRs)" consisted of four early-career academics who worked and lived in Europe and North America. Our participants were almost exclusively female; this also relates to the nature of our own networks and consequently our goal of getting into the field as soon as possible.

We conducted the first round of interviews in April 2020, the second in May 2020, and the third in June 2020. Once it became obvious that the pandemic was not subsiding by autumn 2020, we decided to continue our interviews, strengthening the longitudinal nature of our data. ECRs met once more at the turn of 2020–2021, the Mixed career stage group met two more times, whereas Established researchers met four more times during 2020 and in early 2021. The Established researchers found the meetings particularly inspiring and helpful, prompting them to request additional meetings.

We have summarised the composition of all groups and specified the interview months in Table 13.2 (see Appendix).

In addition to the interview rounds, the authors met a total of 14 times between March 2020 and September 2021. While we did not analyse these meetings as data, we did go back to them during the analysis process for the discussions we had related to our interview experiences, the pandemic, and our own academic work. All interviews and planning meetings were recorded and transcribed. All participants signed an informed consent form before the study.

To ensure not locking ourselves into a specific focus before the data generation—to maintain "non-focus" of qualitative research (Aarnikoivu & Saarinen, 2021)—our interview guide consisted of a variety of questions related to academic work. We chose to analyse the data by employing qualitative content analysis (Blackstone, 2012; Mayring, 2000). We developed our coding scheme based on the concepts of *responsive* and *adaptive* pandemic practices (Werron & Ringel, 2020) to investigate the short- and potential longer-term changes in universities' practices, as described by the interviewed academics. In addition, we make use of the notion of academic psychological contract (Shen, 2010; Sewpersad et al., 2019), elaborated in the previous section. As a result, our coding scheme was developed as shown in Table 13.1.

Additionally, we coded whether the tone of the conversation was positive/optimistic/happy or negative/pessimistic/anxious to shed further light on how the interviewed academics perceived the responses of their universities to the pandemic and how their descriptions of their

Table 13.1 The coding scheme

Perspective	*Sub-category*	*Example*
Coping with the universities' pandemic practices (adapted from Werron & Ringel, 2020)	*Responsive* pandemic practices	Everyday practices that help academics adapt to the new situation
	Adaptive pandemic practices	Changing practices that reflect the academia and academic work in the long term, once the pandemic is over
The individuals' relationship with their work and their institution (adapted from Shen, 2010; Sewpersad et al., 2019)	*Transactional* component	Pay or working hours
	Relational component	Personal autonomy, development, interpersonal relations, and support at work
	Ideological component	Employees' commitment to the "cause" or values of the employer organisation

relationship to their university and the academic work fluctuated over time. As Angelone (2019) pointed out, "being in the field" applies to both offline and online ethnographies, even though there might be differences in terms of spatiality and process. To assess the validity and reliability of our study, we used the guiding questions, criteria and techniques proposed by Whittemore et al. (2001) in the context of qualitative research specifically.

Empirical Findings

As the composition of the groups differed, so did their conversations. The Established researchers' group had a very collective approach, and they spent a significant amount of time in each interview discussing the overall pandemic situation in their countries, also paying the most attention to structural issues, such as the generic conditions of HE in their respective countries. Being fairly established in their careers and inhabiting strategic or academic leadership positions, they had wide-ranging discussions on the actions of universities and their implications during the pandemic. The conversations in this group started from the initial shock of the pandemic and quickly moved to distance working (and, for some, home-schooling), coupled with a feeling of opportunity to take a breather from the hectic

academic life, and to learn to better take care of oneself. However, the overall mood soon turned darker, as the realities of the pandemic hit; the requirements arising from work and care responsibilities and the frustration with the conduct of the university employers during the pandemic started to wear on the interviewees. The interviewees expressed feelings of exhaustion, lack of motivation, and disillusionment towards their employers' pandemic practices. Towards the end of the data collection, a year after the pandemic had started, the interviewees had reconciled themselves with the situation and adapted their own ways of working, or, in some cases, made more radical changes such as changing jobs or moving out of the city in search of more spacious living arrangements.

The Mixed career stage group, by contrast, differed from the other groups in that they had worked together in a research project and thus knew each other already before the pandemic. They were all employed by a publicly funded institution. Their group consisted of established and early career researchers; some of them in the middle of data collection that would have required travel. Before the pandemic, some had already developed practices of combining on site and distance work. The ECR, however, expressed a need for on-site work possibilities, for several reasons: at first negotiating space with extended family members, and later because of a need for a physical academic community. As the more established colleagues mostly expressed at least some level of satisfaction with having the possibility to flexibly take care of family matters or personal projects during the lockdown, the ECR expressed at times a concern for not having the connections to peers and established colleagues, leading to some concern about not knowing whether one was working according to his/her employer's expectations.

Our third group consisted of ECRs, who only discussed their universities' practices to a very limited extent. Instead, the participants of this group focused on their own individual experiences during the first months of the pandemic. Most of the participants already had experience with distance work and were able to plan their own daily work schedule. What was significantly different to pre-pandemic times, however, was the blurriness of work/leisure, as not being able to choose where to work (home or office) caused anxiety. What also differed from "before" was that the participants now had to negotiate the use of space and time with other people, which ultimately resulted in major life changes, such as moving from a small apartment located in the city centre into a larger house in the suburbs.

We will next move on to elaborating on the participants' discussions related to the institutions' pandemic practices; and then discuss how the

individuals emphasised either the transactional, relational, or ideological elements of their own relationship with their institution and their academic work. In many cases, these different elements overlapped. Where relevant, we take note specifically of whether the perceptions expressed are made by ECRs or established participants; and whether they operate in primarily publicly funded or privately funded universities.

Coping with the Institutions' Pandemic Practices

Responsive Practices

During the first interviews in early April 2020, approximately one month after the initial lockdowns, the participants' recollections of the responsive activities of universities and their own feelings were rather fresh, and mostly related to the sudden lockdowns and moving to online teaching. On the surface, these seemed to affect the established researchers more, as they had more institutional tasks and responsibilities. However, it might also mean that the ECRs did not yet have very strong institutional links and contacts. All groups discussed universities' responsive practices that had directly impacted their lives, such as universities requiring everyone to study and work from home, moving all teaching and events online, postponing the start of the teaching period, or extending an ongoing holiday in order to allow for planning of teaching online, or, for example, dismantling IT labs to provide people with computers to take home.

The immediate feelings expressed in April 2020 pertained to recollections of something sudden and chaotic happening, as work and home issues intertwined in a new way. Many participants were unsatisfied with the choices made by the institution, or inaction of the institution in addressing the concerns of individual employees. They felt that they had been left alone to deal with the changes caused by the pandemic:

> Of course your management says that oh but you should only deliver the online teaching the best you can, you're not supposed to do it really perfectly BUT we're going to take all the students through this semester. (2, Mixed group, 1st interview)

> Ok, everybody got the spring break to figure things out, and then we hit the ground running and the expectation is that we got it all figured out and we're back to regular work output and expectations. (3, Established researchers, 1st interview)

Similarly, the participants described responsive pandemic practices in which they themselves were engaged in as teachers, and thus representatives of their institutions towards students. These were, for instance, moving teaching online, recording lectures, or preparing material packages for their students:

> I teach masters students and graduate students […] what they ask for and demand in a way is shorter bits so I have a lecture and I have to cut this lecture in 20 minute chunks but this is also very good for me because […] I have to make a recording in one go and it's easier for me to make recordings of 20 minutes than of 45 minutes or an hour. (1, Established researchers, 6th interview)

Few positive exceptions existed, such as descriptions of the university enabling distance work for their staff. However, especially the established interviewees expressed frustration with the university measures, as well as with how the universities placed more requests on individuals instead of offering them support. Frustration rose especially from cases in which the university response would call for some sort of transaction. In the following excerpt, both the response (the institution offering facilities to employees) and the transaction (allowing to work at the university to manage the cramped circumstances at home) are missing.

> (*sigh*) we're doing our best to cope and it just takes a toll in all of us, and my colleague, she's sitting in a small apartment the four of them together and she has to sit in the bedroom and she had to sit there to chair a PhD defence and she wasn't even allowed to go to her office and there was like no objective reason nothing would have happened for her. (Established 2, Mixed group, 5th interview)

> Now I'm really annoyed at the admin people at my university because we're getting all these emails about: NOW WE WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES TEACHING AND WE WANT TO MAKE THE BEST OF ALL THIS ONLINE TEACHING AND CAN YOU PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH ALL YOUR BEST EXAMPLES FOR THE NEXT YEAR and I'm just GET OFF MY BACK *laughing*, I'm so sick. (Established 1, Mixed group, 3rd interview; capitalisation refers to louder voice)

Adaptive Practices

Adaptive practices were discussed in terms of practical consequences (returning to campus but also participating in hybrid activities), on the one hand, and the uncertainties of the longer-term financial consequences (cutting costs and its effects on staff), on the other. The practical issues revolved around questions such as devising plans on how many people can be on the various premises, or through measuring classrooms to see whether they were big enough to accommodate the envisioned number of students. The discussion on returning to campus could either be defined as pertaining to responsive or adaptive practices, depending on where one draws the line between short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic. This can be illustrated by the following excerpt—a sarcastic commentary on the proposal of a "blended" or hybrid return to work:

> We stream the teaching and then I think we will ask the students to themselves arrange that it's like cross-study groups, and some are at home and some are in class. […] then if it's like two in class and one at home, then they have to communicate during the group assignments during class, or whether it'll be all the ones that are in the same groups are at home so they have to then communicate in some way in class, and they have to send emails with questions because they can't ask directly […] easy peasy lemon squeezy, right? (ECR, Mixed group, 3rd interview)

The discussion on returning to campus seemed somewhat different for North American participants working in HE systems that are highly dependent on tuition fees as opposed to those who work in primarily tax-funded systems (Europe). The North American participants expressed strong sentiments of feeling pressure to return to campus: though faculty adapted rather well to the new situation and were satisfied with increased online opportunities, there seemed to be a push by the universities towards doing everything the way it was done before the pandemic.

Much of the discussion on adaptive pandemic practices in the group of Established researchers was thus linked to the longer-term financial sustainability of the universities and how they might have to cut costs in order to adapt. This caused frustration, as the universities were perceived to reorient their costs on wrong things (for example, funding infrastructure while cutting personnel costs) or to reflect the underlying fundamental flaws of the financial structure and neoliberal ethos of HE. This following quote comes from a person who worked in a university with significant

private endowment and was therefore in a relatively stable financial situation regardless of the pandemic and, as a result, somewhat free to make choices about funding allocations.

> Our plan is to take out half the furniture in every CLASSROOM, and to install these really expensive CAMERAS, that can allow people to kinda be in the room or out of the room, and I'm sitting there with some faculty and we're like "so you're telling us that you have two million dollars somewhere to pay for these cameras, and yet you're also telling us we need to cut 10 million dollars in the budget". (2, Established researchers, 3rd interview; capitalisation refers to louder voice)

Another interviewee, representing a public university serving an audience of primarily ethnic minorities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which was underfunded already before the pandemic, described the financial deficit the institution had pre-pandemic, and the deficit it is expected to accumulate during the pandemic. The participant anticipated some of the adaptive practices the institution may have to adopt, and consequently, what that might mean for them personally, receiving much sympathy from the other participants:

> I regularly think about, so 24 million [dollars of deficit] and another 24 million [dollars of deficit], there's strong chance in a year I don't have programme to work in, so it is constantly in my mind, what are my backup plans, because there's a real chance at some point the only way an institution is gonna save that level of money is to actually cut programmes, and in the States as a tenured faculty member, the only way you can get rid of me is financial exigency, WHICH IS NOW *laughing*. (3, Established researchers, 4th interview, capitalisation refers to louder voice)

Individuals' Relationships with Their Work and Own University in Light of the Academic Psychological Contract

Transactional

While Shen (2010) defined the transactional component of the academic psychological contact to comprise both salary and work time, there was in general little discussion on salary during the interviews. This may perhaps be due to salary processes being slow in academia, but also perhaps because it was not a relevant question to most participants in the current situation. The Established researchers' group was the only one with a significant

discussion on salaries in the form of actualised or potential pay cuts resulting from the Northern American employers’ deficit accumulated before and during the pandemic, or by being on a nine-months-per-year contract with a small stipend to cover work during the summer months.

In contrast, working hours were discussed frequently in terms of transaction. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic, the interviewees discussed how work and leisure became blurred, how one was no longer able to work as long hours as one previously had due to other responsibilities. The “blurry work time” was a recurring topic, meaning that the participants had not quite got used to working from home and scheduling their days, even though “flexiwork” would have been an option before. For many, blurred boundaries of work and free time were also a source of guilt:

> If you watch the news and media, you will realise the whole world is a mess, so I think it’s very common now that people are not so efficient all the time. But I try, and every Friday now I have promised to myself that hey I will do some work during the weekend because I haven’t been working so hard during the week, in a perfect way, but every weekend I have been so TIRED that I haven’t been able to push myself to working. (Postdoctoral researcher, ECRs, 1st interview)

Another source of guilt was the inability to work as much as one would want to. The norms in academia tend to favour longer work weeks than is normal in the labour market, and the pressure is particularly heavy in ECR and precarious situations (OECD, 2021). The discussions also reflected the internalised hierarchies of academic work, where research outputs are valued over teaching and administration (Hunt, 2016; Dugas et al., 2020).

> I have no headspace, I’m not motivated, I cannot concentrate, I feel like a five- or six-year-old who has an attention span *laughing* of five to seven minutes, and, as I said before, I feel guilty because I should use the free time in summer to write, so basically I feel guilty and awful. (1, Established researchers, 4th interview)

In the later interviews in the spring and summer of 2020, the transactional component reflected the participants having entered some kind of a “survival mode” where they eased their requirements on themselves both in terms of work and family. Interestingly, as the pandemic continued, various value conflicts manifested themselves with the interviewees no longer willing to work during the evenings and weekends.

Relational

Shen's (2010) relational component covers a broad spectrum of topics, such as support gained from the employer, autonomy to decide on one's own work, and relationships with one's colleagues. This category did not appear particularly strongly in the discussions of Group 3 (ECRs), except as expressions of support received from their supervisors.

Typically, the relational elements were about missing random encounters with colleagues, for all kinds of professional and personal reasons, as the excerpt from the first interview shows:

> I'm sort of growing increasingly anxious about the fact that this [seeing colleagues face to face] may not happen for quite a while yet, and while I don't miss my office, I miss us having lunch together and being able to pop into [name] office and just say should we just talk about this and that, thinking about just being able to have conversations with people without having to agree on it first. (Established 2, Mixed group, 1st interview)

In the next two excerpts, the relational element of missing random encounters becomes a comment on the individualisation of (academic) work; and desire to have the autonomy to decide where one works and to be trusted by one's employer:

> Where we usually could talk about things over lunch and find common solutions, it has become individualised, so I have to figure out how to deal with my students, [name] has to figure out how deal with her students and so forth […] responsibility has become much more individualised rather than it being a sort of collective responsibility. (Established 2, Mixed group, 1st interview)

> I mean I'm a person who usually spends every minute of my 40 working hours sitting in my office, on campus, and I don't wanna do that anymore, I wanna a little more freedom and flexibility, and I want to feel trusted by my employer that I can work just as well away from the office as I can in the office. (2, Established researchers, 3rd interview)

An extreme description of relational negative emotions was described in terms of "rage" by one of the established interviewees, interpreted as one outcome of the prolonged exceptional situation.

> I get so furious […] I mean I just get upset with people in a way that I normally don't get upset with people. I'm just pissed off half the time and some of my colleagues are so annoyed as well and I think that is actually the most important thing in terms of what corona does […] and I can talk about all the positive things the flexibility and so forth but I'm not used to being so annoyed with people and whenever we have our department meetings I can just feel the level of frustration and picking on each other and that is high and that's sad. (Established 2, Mixed group, 5th interview)

This excerpt summarises the relational experiences of the participants as a combination or feelings of flexibility, frustration, stress, and sadness, illustrating the complex situations in which academics simultaneously navigate the pandemic, their work, and personal lives.

Ideological

The ideological component refers to individuals' alignment with and commitment to the organisation's mission, goals, and values (Sewpersad et al., 2019). In our dataset, we could identify instances in which the interviewees exhibited a strong commitment to the work itself, especially to teaching and caring for students, although the research work was often hampered by a lack of time, energy, or motivation. Moreover, administrative work was sometimes considered a burden. The discussions of ECRs did not really feature the ideological component. There was some disapproval of rushing back to offline teaching but otherwise university practices were not really criticised, which again suggests that all ECR participants had managed to negotiate their work and doctoral studies or postdoctoral work in a way which suited many of them well.

In the Mixed career stage group, in turn, the ECR expressed concerns about the "right kind of work" or the expected number of hours, and the difficulties of doing distance work. This reflects a desire to get properly socialised into the academic community, particularly as the participants had already participated in the research group's work before the lockdown:

> spending time with other PhD students, seeing what they do, what they are reading, and talking to PhD students who are like further along, just to see if I'm doing it the correct way, there's no correct way so it's not the guidelines that I need, it's just the everyday discussions and the whole becoming [a researcher]. (ECR, Mixed group, 1st interview)

In contrast, the discussions in the group of Established researchers contained an increasing disillusionment with academia and the university as employer. The interviewees perceived that especially in our Northern American cases, academia is too much driven by neoliberal monetary values and disregards the wellbeing of the people who work there. The psychological contract is, according to Thompson and Bunderson (2003), at its most vulnerable when individuals feel let down by their institutions in ideological, rather than merely transactional or relational, terms. In the following excerpt, from February 2021, the interviewee from the underfunded, struggling institution refers to the latter expecting employees to do more with less resources; feeling that thus the institution does not support the staff, and as a result, one's faith in the institution is shattered.

> The president came to our department meeting blah blah blah whatever check-ins, and I said I'm really concerned about faculty workloads, faculty morale, budget cuts, we have no admin staff anymore supporting the department and programmes, fatigue is real, like all of this stuff. He pauses very uncomfortably for a bit, what feels like minutes, it was probably ten seconds, and he then he says, "you know what, we're all just going to have to do more" was his response to a concern about fatigue and the mass exodus of faculty and staff leaving to take other jobs, is just "do more" […] and I get accused of having a tone. (3, Established researchers, 7th interview)

The interviews also illuminate some directions in which HE needs to change for the psychological contract to be mended. The following excerpt is an expression of longer-term adaptive changes that are seen as positive changes in the future; changes that enable HE to become a better workplace.

> I have some colleagues who have said basically at the end of this yeah we are never going back to all of us in the office 40 hours a week ever again, every day we will have one person who's day it is to work from home, they will get a little bit more flexibility and balance in their life, they can still get work done […] so I'm hopeful that people in the system will exercise their power and discretion for good. (2, Established researchers, 8th interview)

The changes for a better future require harnessing the various elements of the psychological contracts, as exemplified by the following excerpt that draws both on the ideological and relational elements as collective resistance, as well as from the transactional element in questioning what's fair in terms of what is required in contemporary academia:

> I think it'll also be nice to open up more and just to show that resistance and say well it's not fair to have hybrid teaching we can do that in an emergency [but] we're no longer in the state of emergency that means that in order to cope with that we all have to pull our forces together and stand together and have that sort of unity. (Established 2, Mixed group, 5th interview)

From a long-term perspective, HE was seen as needing to change permanently by focusing on more sustainable funding, as well as paying more attention to the wellbeing of staff and students alike. Notably, this sentiment, represented here by a Europe-based academic within a stable tax-funded institution, who was less likely to feel the immediate financial pinch of the pandemic, was shared by all Established researcher participants, regardless of their institutional background.

> We shouldn't exhaust ourselves that way anymore. We shouldn't let academia and the whole system exhaust us in that way. It's unacceptable, but we accepted it over the years, more and more and more, budget cuts, more work, more students, of course this is capitalism, but this could be a chance and a turning point for sustainability, for wellbeing, for other values. (1, Established researchers, 3rd interview)

Discussion and Conclusion

Academics working in different HE institutions and career stages perceive their university's pandemic responses in different ways, as illuminated earlier. Their relationships with the university may alternately be marked by disillusionment, frustration, and conflict, while in other instances, universities are seen as caring for people in—and beyond—their employee role, and the participants themselves similarly in their role as teachers show care towards their students. As opposed to more established teachers, researchers and administrators, the pandemic did not bring that much change in terms of work itself for ECRs, working largely on their individual, self-directed projects. However, ECRs also stood out to lose important contacts and networks, as international travel and on-site conferences were mostly on hold, while networks established during one's early career are often crucial for further academic success (Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015).

Clearly one of the key questions during the pandemic, with implications also for the "new normal", is the increasing blurriness of work and leisure. How much work is enough work in academia? How will the perceived value of teaching and administration develop in comparison with that of research, as teaching and administrative work is at the same time

undervalued and overemphasised in pandemic conditions (see Hunt, 2016; Dugas et al., 2020)? How are individuals able to set up boundaries for themselves and their work (Shankar et al., 2021)? For ECRs, not being able to choose where to work (home or office) also caused anxiety, whereas for many established participants, the situation was different. This was at least partly also a positive issue of being able to flexibly organise work and family issues, but not without problems (Utoft, 2020). For ECRs, an additional strain in this regard was being cramped up in small spaces, often with members of the extended family (see Corbera et al., 2020).

The short-term nature of responsive practices, namely universities' focus on moving employees and students to working online, did not seem to have a particularly strong link to the characteristics of the HE system itself. The pandemic response was immediate, and in many cases mandated by national regulations and guidelines. However, as the universities' practices were oriented towards the adaptive longer-term practices, the characteristics of the HE systems or individual HE institutions became more pronounced.

At the institutional level, these adaptive practices are mirrored at the individual level in terms of the ideological component of the psychological contract, namely breaking of the trust in the institution's values (Bunderson, 2001; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). While some critical scholars (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Welsh, 2017) have argued that in many cases, academics are prone to internalising the managerialist university values, some of the stories of our participants also illustrate resistance to the managerialist practices, catalysed by the breaking of the academic psychological contract during a crisis.

From the perspective of long-term effects of the pandemic on university and employee relationships, the results highlight three key issues: *First*, from the point of view of the responsive practices, one year into the pandemic the responses were largely those of frustration. The European participants, particularly, discussed university activities relatively little, but when they did, the tone was, especially with the more established members, that of frustration or resistance. For the North Americans, the frustration with the university's pandemic responses and disillusionment with academia in general appeared even stronger. For the university administration, this poses the challenge of how to support the different categories of staff if the pandemic continues or if other similar circumstances occur. During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities, for example, have extended the doctoral candidature periods and stipends for doctoral researchers (Le,

2021), stopped the tenure clock to support tenure-track academics in caregiver roles (Shillington et al., 2020); or supported transition to online teaching (Sumer et al., 2021). However, these may only be "quick fixes" that do not necessarily address the larger structural challenges related to the lack of a "culture of care" and the need for more respectful and sustainable academic practices (Corbera et al., 2020).

Second, losing faith in both the institution and the academic work invokes the ideological elements of the psychological contract. This seemed to trigger and be triggered by a longer-term dissatisfaction with certain elements particularly in the North American system where the participants felt that financial concerns of the university overrode the concerns of the staff. For them, the salient questions were linked to the future sustainability of exploitative neoliberal HE in general (see Loveday, 2018; Blackmore, 2020). For the university administration, this poses the challenge of how to (re-)build trust in the institution.

Third, the differential response by the interviewees raises a question of who is (or is not) in the position to voice their dissatisfaction (Loveday, 2018), what are the practices of resistance (Anderson, 2008) and what kind of compensation is available for the problems that emerged during the lockdowns. With some established academics, the *transactional* (being able to flexibly "exchange" pandemic lockdown homework with taking care of elderly parents or different kinds of personal projects) was a way of getting payback. For the ECRs, in turn, being able to flexibly organise their work was not new, but during the pandemic that could also become an extra burden; they had neither the community nor the transactional benefits. Given that early-career researchers often constitute a vulnerable group at universities, we ask how academia could support them on a regular basis, which would then enable supporting them in more exceptional circumstances as well (see Le, 2021; Shillington et al., 2020).

Finally, from the point of view of the university's administration, these specific viewpoints pose the challenge of how to better recognise the needs of different staff groups in the future, as the institutional and individual work conditions change. These are not merely pandemic-related questions but also rather catalysed by the pandemic and outcomes of longer developments. The academics may not be willing to let themselves be exhausted by the increasing demands of modern academia anymore. The pandemic has, nevertheless, also shown that there are different ways of undertaking academic work. The global crisis offers a possibility to rethink and reorganise academia in the twenty-first century.

Appendix

Table 13.2 Groups and participants

	Group 1: Established researchers	*Group 2: Mixed career stage*	*Group 3: Early-career researchers (ECRs)*
Number of participants (the interviewer included)	4	4	5
Number of meetings	8	5	4
Geographical location of interviewees	Northern and Central Europe; North America	Northern Europe	Europe; North America
Field	HE research	Internationalisation research	HE research
Stage of career	Established and independent academics	Early-career and established researchers.	Early-career researchers (doctoral or postdoctoral research)
Did the participants know each other before the study?	All participants knew the interviewer; the participants did not know each other	Yes	Some participants knew the interviewer; the participants did not know each other
Gender	All female	All female	Four female, one male
Children	All participants except for one had a child/children. One had grown-up child/children	One participant had children	Two participants had a child/children
Interviews conducted in	1st: April 2020 2nd: May 2020 3rd: June 2020 4th: August 2020 5th: October 2020 6th: November 2020 7th: January 2021 8th: April 2021	1st: April 2020 2nd: May 2020 3rd: July June 2020 4th: November 2020 5th: April 2021	1st: April 2020 2nd: May 2020 3rd: June 2020 4th: November 2020

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