

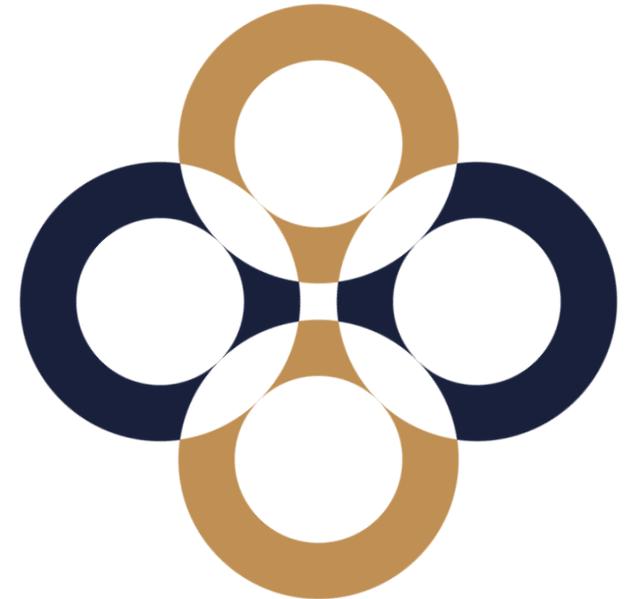
Stress as a systemic feature of (early) academic careers

From individual experiences to institutional design

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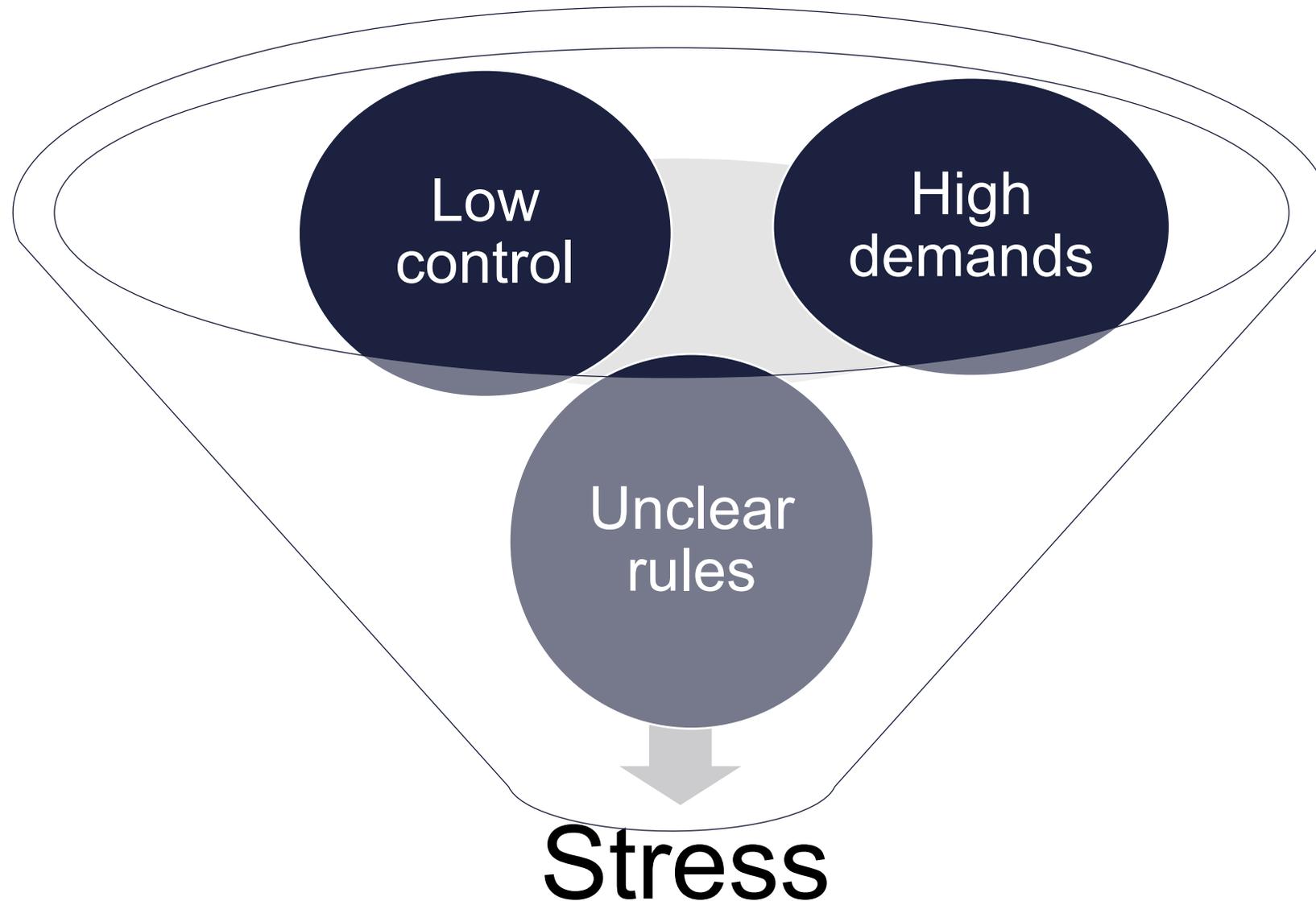
29 January 2026 (online)



Outline

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- 1 Stress ≠ Weakness
 - 2 How academia generates pressure
 - 3 Why early career is the “stress hotspot”?
 - 4 What helps? (mentoring + institutions)
 - 5 How EAAE can help?

What if stress is not a personal failure?



Why talk about systems?

- Career structures
 - Short-term contracts, probation periods, promotion-or-leave rules
 - Delayed or uncertain career stabilization
- Evaluation and incentive regimes
 - Strong emphasis on measurable outputs (publications, grants)
 - Repeated assessments and performance monitoring
 - Changing or unclear evaluation criteria
- Work organization
 - Simultaneous expectations in research, teaching, and administration
 - Fragmented time and limited opportunities for deep work
- Power and voice
 - Asymmetric decision-making authority
 - Limited ability to refuse tasks or renegotiate workloads

The global early-career reality

- Precarious entry into academia
 - Short-term and fixed-term contracts as the norm
 - Delayed access to stable positions
 - Repeated probationary or review periods
- Intensified competition
 - Growing numbers of PhD graduates competing for limited posts
 - Concentration of funding and prestige
 - Strong pressure to demonstrate excellence early
- Early and continuous performance demands
 - Expectation to publish and attract funding at early career stages
 - Limited tolerance for “learning periods” or slower trajectories
 - Long publication and grant cycles conflicting with short evaluation windows
- Blurring of academic roles
 - Research, teaching, administration, and service expected simultaneously
 - Weak boundaries between working time and personal time

Permanent uncertainty

Contractual insecurity

Uncertain career timelines

Moving goals

Changing rules

Living in „almost”

- Almost stable
- Almost funded
- Almost promoted

Project-based survival

- Employment and income dependence
- Research agenda dependence
- Evaluation pressure
- „When grants decide your future... projects become survival.”
- “You don’t just write proposals — you write your next salary.”
- „Projectisation shifts risk to individuals.”

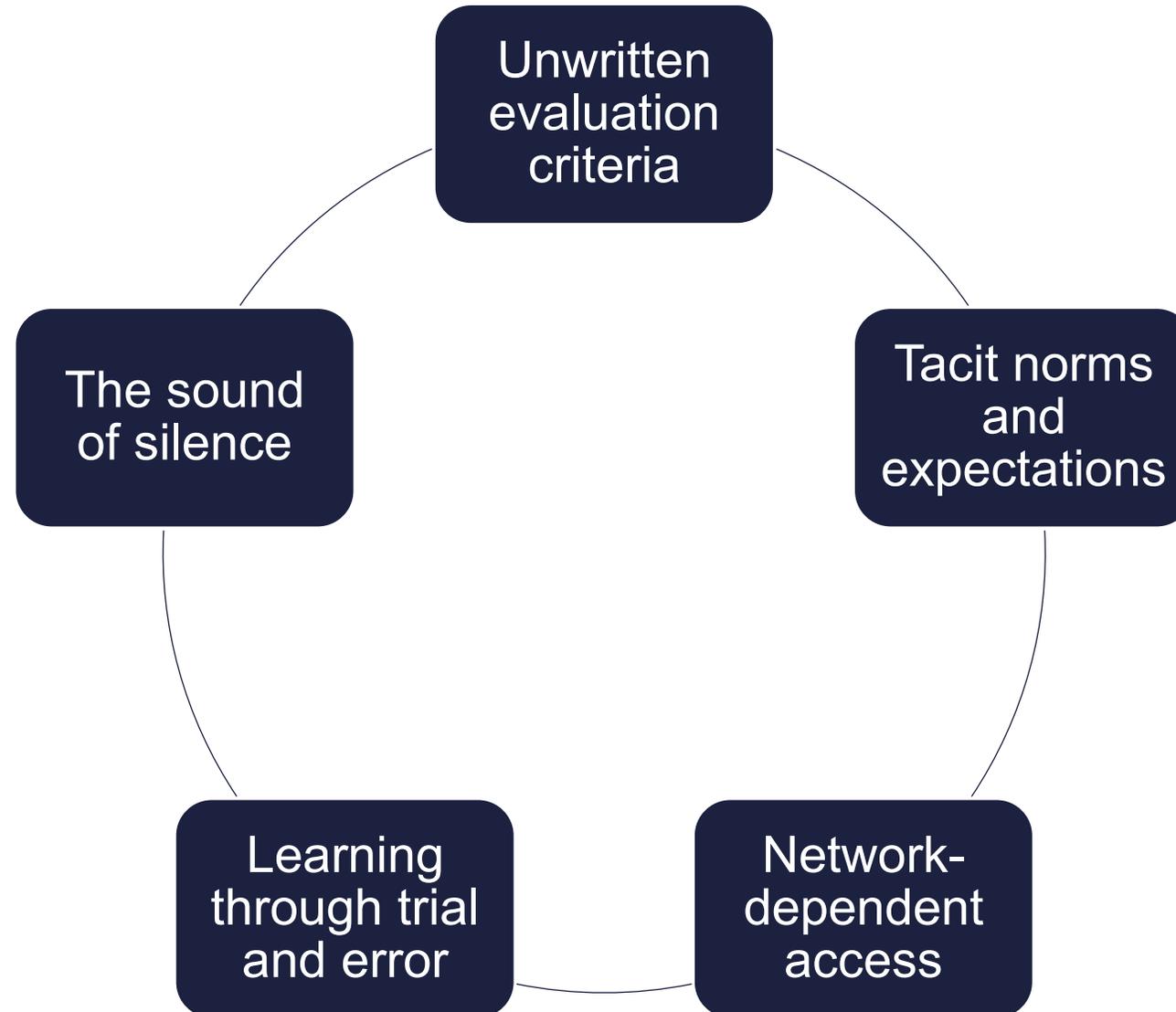


Photo: Trinette Reed/Getty Images

Mobility and comparison

- Norms of mobility
 - International experience framed as a marker of excellence
 - Expectations to relocate repeatedly at early career stages
 - Mobility often treated as choice, rather than constraint
- Continuous benchmarking
 - Constant comparison with peers across institutions and countries
 - Publication counts, grants, and rankings as visible signals
 - Success defined relatively, not absolutely
- Unequal starting conditions
 - Differences in funding, infrastructure, mentoring, and networks
 - Family, care responsibilities, and personal circumstances shape mobility options
- Psychological effects
 - Fear of falling behind
 - Pressure to keep up rather than develop sustainably
 - Comparison-driven anxiety replacing intrinsic motivation

Invisible rules: The rules are not written. But they are enforced.

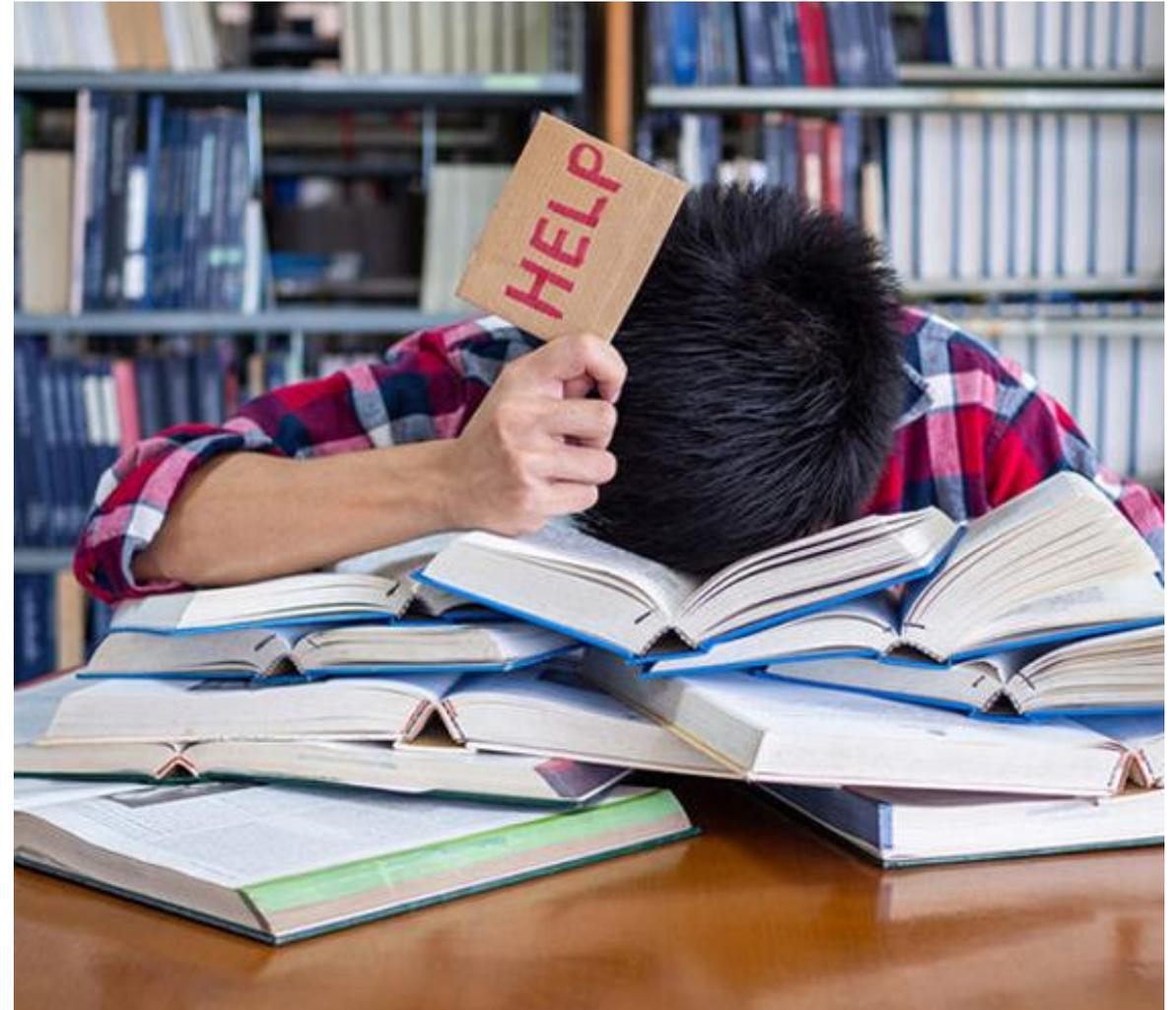


Identity fragmentation

- Competing role expectations
 - Researcher, teacher, supervisor, administrator, project manager
 - Excellence expected simultaneously across all roles
- Conflicting value systems
 - Intrinsic research curiosity vs metric-driven performance
 - Long-term intellectual development vs short-term outputs
- Multiple audiences
 - Local teaching communities vs international publishing markets
 - Disciplinary depth vs interdisciplinary or policy relevance
- Emotional and cognitive strain
 - Constant role-switching
 - Difficulty forming a coherent professional identity
 - Uncertainty about “what kind of academic” one is expected to be

How mentoring can help?

- Reducing uncertainty
 - Translating formal and informal rules
 - Clarifying expectations, timelines, and priorities
- Capacity building
 - Skills and knowledge improvements
 - Legitimising boundary-setting and workload negotiation
- Showing good examples
 - „I am not alone”
 - „There are great examples I want to follow”
 - „I want to be like him/her”



EAAE Mentoring Programme

- The Covid-19 pandemic led to several conference cancellations
- PhD students and early career researchers lost opportunities to network and to get feedback
- A group of early career researchers took the initiative of creating an online supporting group (AgeconMeet)
- Meanwhile the EAAE Board, after a pitch by Diogo Souza Monteiro, formed a working group to assess the interest and viability of an EAAE Sponsored Mentoring program
- After a period of consultation with early career colleagues a call for mentors and mentees was open in February 2022.
- New call will be out soon (deadline of applications will be 30 April 2026)



Photo: iStock, Credit: VAWiley

EAAE Reading Circles Initiative

- Circles will run for one academic year (renewable by interest).
- Meetings are expected monthly and held virtually, though in-person meetings are encouraged when possible.
- Each Circle will appoint a lead, serving as liaison with the EAAE-ECR Committee, and rotate facilitation among members.
- Topics can include theory, methodology, empirical applications, or outreach themes (e.g., resilience economics, machine learning applications, policy deliberation).
- Each Circle will produce a short annual activity report (max. 800 words) for the EAAE-ECR Committee
- Official call will be out soon (deadline of applications will be 31 March 2026)

The EAAE as a society – services given

Congresses,
seminars,
webinars

PhD
workshops

Mentoring

Reading
circles

Newsflashes

Institutional responsibility

- Designing transparent career pathways
 - Clear criteria for evaluation, promotion, and renewal
 - Stable rules communicated early and consistently
- Aligning expectations with capacity
 - Realistic workload models
 - Recognition of teaching, supervision, and service
 - Protection of time for research and recovery
- Managing uncertainty
 - Reducing unnecessary short-term contracts
 - Providing predictable timelines and feedback
 - Avoiding constant policy shifts
- Creating safe organisational climates
 - Legitimacy of saying “no”
 - Leadership that recognises stress as systemic
 - Trust-based rather than surveillance-based management

Concluding remarks

- Early-career stress is patterned, not accidental
 - It emerges consistently across systems, disciplines, and countries
 - It reflects how academic careers are structured and governed
- Individual coping is necessary but insufficient
 - Resilience and self-care help people survive
 - They cannot correct structural misalignment
- Institutions matter — profoundly
 - Clarity, stability, mentoring, and workload design reduce stress
 - Governance choices shape well-being as much as individual behaviour
- A reframing is needed
 - from “How do individuals cope?”
 - to “How do institutions design sustainable academic careers?”
- Reducing early-career stress is not about lowering standards — it is about creating conditions under which excellence is sustainable.



**Thank you for
your attention!**

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