7. Defining and experiencing excellence in a neoliberal academia: comparing the views of researchers at different career stages and roles

Rosy Musumeci, Angela Balzano, Aleksandra Migalska and Paulina Sekuła

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the consequences of neoliberal reforms applied to universities, which aim to improve academic performance and efficiency (Capano et al., 2017; Szwabowski, 2019), and how these reforms have influenced the construction of the concepts of merit and excellence. These concepts are increasingly dominant in academic discourse in many countries (Kwiek, 2021; Rostan and Vaira, 2011), and heavily influence the processes and practices in academics' recruitment and career progression, but they are also subject to criticism, especially for their alleged neutrality and objective measurability. Criticism focuses on their function in justifying inequalities, with some voices—that of Sandel (2020) among others—seeing merit as an instrument of oppression rather than justice. The criticism on excellence also comes from feminist scholars emphasising gender biases in the construction and recognition of excellence (Jenkins et al., 2022).

We will examine two national contexts, Italy and Poland, which introduced neoliberal university evaluation models focusing on productivity and competition. In Italy, there is the 'Departments of Excellence' ranking, while Poland established the 'Initiative of Excellence—Research University' programme. Both aim to foster a competitive and productive academic environment. The chapter compares two major interdisciplinary universities—the University of Turin (UNITO) (Italy) and Jagiellonian University (UJ) (Poland)—to explore how merit and excellence are perceived and experienced across different groups of researchers, focusing on gender, career stage (junior or senior), and discipline (SSH and STEM).

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In line with previous literature, discussed in the second section, we expect that the concepts of merit and excellence are hiding biases related to gender in both national contexts.

It is based on 68 interviews conducted in two universities (UNITO in Italy and UJ in Poland), with 46 early and advanced male and female career researchers (25 in UNITO, 21 in UJ) both in SSH and STEM fields, and 22 academics in key governance/top management roles ('key informants'—KIs) from the two institutions (14 in UNITO, eight in UJ). We have used a qualitative approach and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to examine subjective experiences and perceptions of academics.

Furthermore, inductive sub-categories (data driven) were formed to respond flexibly to emerging issues in order to allow for an open analysis approach. A further step elaborated the similarities and differences between the two countries, disciplinary fields, job positions, and genders in terms of the developed themes.

The chapter is structured as follows. After the empirical and theoretical background, there is a brief description of the institutional contexts. The findings are organised according to the main research questions and themes that guided our analysis. First, we describe and discuss interpretations and views about excellence and merit, ways of defining them, notions, meanings, criteria (i.e., productivity), indicators (like the number of publications) of excellence and merit in the interviewees' discourses and narratives. Second, we focus on evaluating excellence and merit: here we describe and discuss views and experiences of senior academics in key governance/top management roles in evaluating excellence and merit; how the criteria of excellence is used in the selection and promotion processes; and with what margins of discretion and challenges. The third theme is the critical thinking and ambivalent attitudes towards excellence in the interviewees' reflections. Finally, we focus on the (gender) implications of these ideal and normative models of excellence, productivity, and merit according to the interviewees.

MERITOCRACY BETWEEN NON-NEUTRALITY AND TYRANNY: PREVIOUS EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL LITERATURE

In the social sciences, the concepts of merit and excellence have been a topic of ongoing discussion. According to Merton (1973, p. 424; also see Martin, 2007, p. 32), scientific excellence is associated with originality, as recognition and esteem accrue to those who have best fulfilled their roles and made genuinely original contributions to the common stock of knowledge. Currently, in the normative and cultural framework of the meritocratic ideal, excellence is

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also conceived as the fruit of individual commitment and measurable through formalised parameters, intended as neutral and objective.

However, the issue of merit being questionable goes back a long way. Weber (1919) warned that university careers rely heavily on chance rather than a serious assessment of individual abilities. In more recent times, and with reference to academic contexts that have over time undergone a progressive process of feminisation, Bourdieu (1984) noted the inconsistency of the supposed objectivity and neutrality of meritocratic systems, which are characterised by gender, class, and race biases. According to Sen (2000), meritocracy, a concept based on attribution judgements, can have various implications depending on its configuration. It is relational, evaluative, and variable according to context, making it relative rather than absolute. Moreover, as Sandel argued (2020), meritocracy has increasingly become an instrument of oppression, justifying injustice. According to him (2020), the abuse of meritocracy is accepted because in recent years the market-driven globalisation and meritocratic concept of success have dissolved moral bonds.

'The imperative of the neoliberal university is to continuously increase performance—measurable in ultimately economic terms, imposing a new auditable disciplining, and quickening pace, of learning, thinking and working' (Troiani and Dutson, 2021, p. 5). The benchmark of excellence is based on ideal academic characteristics, such as overwork, high international mobility, ability to attract large amounts of funding, and continuous scientific productivity in high-impact journals or with prestigious publishers (Thornton, 2014). The 'publish or perish' (POP) culture in universities judges academic staff based on the number of papers they have published in academic journals, and the prestige of those who promote the ranking scheme.

Neoliberal academia, based on meritocratic ideals, has opened up opportunities for women in international calls and funding, disrupting traditional hierarchical practices. However, the emphasis on scientific productivity has not only made existing gender inequalities less visible (Gaiaschi, 2021), but may also increase them as long as it fosters individual competition and promotes a gender-blind idea of excellence (Ferree and Zippel, 2015; van den Brink and Benschop, 2011). As also reported by Anzivino et al. (2023), research shows that women face more difficulties in adhering to the ideal academic model, as they are often less productive (van Arensbergen et al., 2012) due to factors such as a greater care burden (Fox, 2015), less involvement in networks and less mobility (Britton et al., 2012), teaching (Minello and Russo, 2021), administration, and time-consuming activities (Guarino and Borden, 2016; Winslow, 2010). In low-feminised contexts, women with less social capital may find it more difficult to obtain support, information, and other resources to establish themselves academically (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). This could be all the more true in Italy, where academic careers are heavily influenced by social and

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political ties, as attested by scholars (Abramo and D'Angelo, 2020; Pezzoni et al., 2012). There are also broader cultural barriers: persistent gender bias regarding the definition of masculinity/femininity in procedures for recruitment and promotion and career advancement, as well as the way in which scientific excellence is constructed (Addis and Villa, 2003; Lund, 2015; van den Brink and Benschop, 2011).

Following said contributions, we will try to find out how, why, and with which consequences the abuse of meritocracy (associated with the idea of a presumed neutrality of excellence) is accepted, and how merit can become a kind of tyranny in the neoliberal academic context. We will analyse how the neoliberal emphasis on excellence and meritocracy—and on productivity—is behaviourally or culturally accepted or resisted by the interviewees, the critical issues they identified in the current academic systems, and the implications of the hegemonic model according to gender and professional position in two contexts, Italy and Poland.

DEFINING EXCELLENCE AND MERIT

Definitions of excellence present in the narratives of the interviewees from UNITO and UJ are mostly multidimensional and far from identical. While exceptional scientific productivity is the most often mentioned indicator of excellence, other aspects are more varying. On the basis of the narratives of UNITO respondents, excellence can be reconstructed as a four-dimensional construct of scientific, didactic, managerial, and relational aspects (see Anzivino et al., 2023). The first, the scientific one, is defined by the number of publications and (for STEM area) bibliometric indices, the amount of funding obtained on the basis of competition, and internationalisation (affiliation to research centres and experience abroad), but also by the quality of publications and originality of research topics. The second, didactic excellence, is defined by the number of courses, the number of theses and doctoral students being supervised, teaching in courses with many students, and obtaining high evaluations from students. The third one, managerial, is defined by holding prestigious positions at the department or university level, by leadership, decision-making, coordinating large research groups, and managing large financial resources. Finally, the relational/human dimension is defined by networking, having many contacts, but also by the personal characteristics of individuals, specific personality traits, and political and cooperation skills.

Interestingly, the managerial dimension of excellence is absent in the narratives of the UJ interviewees, and teaching excellence is only mentioned by a few respondents. Instead, two categories of excellence criteria seem to dominate: productivity; and intellectual and personality traits. Many male and female scientists, a mixture of early-career, advanced-career, and senior

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academics in key governance/top management roles, both SSH and STEM, agree that having good publications—and 'good' often means giving many points in the evaluation and (as in the case of STEM) translating into a high Hirsch index or high position in international rankings—is a very important aspect of being an excellent researcher.

> A high Hirsch index. I think that's enough. You can be nice, not nice, you can do popularisation, not do it. A high Hirsch index does most of the work of being recognised as a scientist. (Anna_F_39_EC_STEM_UJ)[1]

However, only a few interviewees claim that this is the only criterion of excellence, as in the quote above. Instead, in many narratives certain intellectual and personality characteristics appear to be equally (or more) important. These include being open-minded, having passion for science, being creative and intellectually able (understood by one of the STEM researchers as having basic analytical-mathematical skills), and willing to ask inconvenient, original, and unobvious research questions.

Regarding gender differences in understanding excellence, some gender specificities are reported in the Polish context. Perseverance or determination in seeking solutions to scientific problems and diligence emerge as important aspects of excellence, especially in the narratives of SSH female respondents in the UJ sample.

> Definitely systematicity, openness to knowledge, a willingness to learn more, a desire to find out more, and a continuous thirst for knowledge, a hunger to do something, for more projects, more publications, ideas, so some creativity. (…) But in all of this, I think the most important thing is precisely this diligence and systematicity because if you have that, creativity will come, because if you read articles systematically or write something, the ideas just come. (Marianna_F_30_EC_SSH_UJ)

A few of the Polish respondents also stress the willingness to share knowledge, encourage other people to cooperate, and the ability to work in a team. Interestingly, these competencies are only mentioned by STEM researchers, which may be the effect of disciplinary differences: while STEM research has long been a collaborative effort, at least some SSH studies are still perceived as a solo venture.

A critique of how important productivity has become emerges from both from the UNITO and UJ interviews, that is, quantitative indicators (number of publications and their value measured by assigned points, citations, number of patents and licences, the amount of funding) in evaluating researchers' performance and in the construction and evaluation of excellence. They point out how both national research evaluation systems put an (unjustified) emphasis on the number and quantifiable value of publications, on citations and indexes,

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forcing researchers to POP. For many interviewees, in particular for those in SSH fields, quantity ends up overcoming quality.

> We are multiplying the deforestation of the Amazon because of these crazy rules that force us all to publish more and more, where of course quantity ends up overcoming quality. (…) If I wrote the fundamental work of my life ten years ago, that no longer counts for anything. That is, Einstein's theory of relativity of 1909, in 1917 would no longer work according to the criteria. (Giancarlo_M_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO)

> To be honest, I have a feeling that what really counts are the points. So, whether you're good or not is defined by how many points you score. So you can do mediocre things, but if there are points for it, then it's OK. If I do something interesting but there are no points for it, nobody will be interested. (Marcin_M_37_EC_SSH_UJ)

Let's now look at what else, apart from this emphasis on the quantitative criteria, counts as excellence in evaluation and promotion procedures.

EVALUATING EXCELLENCE AND MERIT

In this section, our analysis focuses on how excellence and merit are evaluated in hiring and promotion processes, particularly by KIs in Italy and Poland. The interviews reveal differences in how early- and advanced-career researchers are assessed, while in the prevailing narrative we have found across career levels, countries, and scientific fields, that there is not an explicit gender differentiation in the hiring and promotion criteria.

In Poland, the evaluation criteria for early-career researchers (Grades D and C) differ from those for advanced researchers. While both groups are judged on measurable criteria like publications, research grants, and international cooperation, for early-career researchers, soft skills (e.g., teamwork, administrative involvement) and 'potential' are crucial. A recommendation from a senior employee, such as a habilitated professor, is also required. As stated by Jacek, the applications of young scientists are delicately suggested (rather than strongly advocated), with the director or dean pointing out their potentials, rather than their achievements: 'There is more talk about such personal relationships and the experience of knowing the person' (Jacek_M_Head of Institute_SSH_UJ). For advanced researchers (applying for university professor positions), academic achievements take priority, and their candidacies are more strongly supported.

In contrast, Italian KIs do not explicitly mention a career-stage differentiation in their hiring and promotion criteria when it comes to the way excellence is evaluated. For both permanent associate professors (Grade B) and fixed-term researchers (Grade C), scientific productivity and international mobility are emphasised more than teaching ability, as declared by Roberto (M_Member

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of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO). External candidates with high skills may be preferred over internal candidates because excellence is valued over continuity for precarious researchers. Piero (M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) and Emanuela (F_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO) noticed that quantitative criteria are insufficient for evaluating 'excellence' since they do not take into consideration relational and team-working skills, which should also be taken into account.

While Italian KIs prioritise excellence and merit—although some Italian interviewees stated that 'an algorithm able to evaluate the best candidate does not exist' (Piero_M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) due to the fact that it is impossible to only apply quantitative criteria—some Polish KIs suggest that, paradoxically, being 'too' excellent could be a disadvantage, especially for early-career researchers. One Polish KI argued that highly qualified individuals might be more suited to industry roles, leading to a preference for a more balanced approach that values soft skills, potential, and adaptability alongside academic achievements:

> I am a proponent of the strategy to take a person who may still need to be developed in terms of merit, but who corresponds in a soft sense, namely the ability to cooperate, because in 2–3 years he or she will already be a pretty cool person. If we take a person who is too good, he or she will not find a place with us, or will not want to work with us at all […] you can tighten the criteria, but you have to be aware of the market and if you tighten the criteria, you will not find a person with such competences who will want to come for such a pay. (Cezary_M_Head of Institute_SSH_UJ)

Similarly, although in a different way (veiled and not explicit like in the Polish case) and particularly in STEM fields, Piero (M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) pointed out that in the Italian academic context it is impossible to only apply quantitative criteria and that a number of different aspects must be taken into account, including the candidate's willingness to continue working at the university and not leave after a few years, making it difficult for the department to meet their needs in terms of research and teaching. While the testimony of the Italian respondent seems to recall the theme of the difficult 'retention' of deserving candidates in STEM fields, that of the two STEM KIs in the Polish context—who say there are not that many applications for job openings and that sometimes candidates do not meet the requirements and therefore the competitions are inconclusive—recall the difficult 'attraction' in the same fields.

Among the mechanisms on which excellence depends, recalled by some Italian and Polish interviewees, we found 'recognition' among peers, a 'reputational' mechanism in the scientific community, well known in the available literature (Picardi, 2020; Rossier, 2020):

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> They are people who are recognised as excellent first and foremost within their own scientific community, in their own scientific disciplinary sector and consequently this translates into attraction of funds because they manage to set up and lead research groups of high scientific value. (Jacopo_M_40_AC_SSH_UNITO)

This mechanism based on 'recognition' and reputation among peers is incorporated—to some extent and in some way—in the promotion procedure in the Polish context, as emerged from the interview with Aleksander (M_Vice Dean_STEM_UJ). He stressed that there are teams at the university that can be approached to assess one's scientific output to see if it is sufficient for promotion. These teams are made up of individuals considered outstanding in their field and who voluntarily agree to provide feedback. This evaluation is not binding on the person who requests it. Rather, it is seen as a form of kind and friendly assistance:

> These are people who we consider outstanding in our faculty, who have voluntarily agreed that they will take a look at my output and tell me: you have a chance or you don't have a chance, or I know that this is being looked at and you just don't have it. So there is a kind of preselection, but it's obviously so friendly, kind and it's not that if someone tells me: you can't then I can't. I can, but I already have this information that it may not be enough. (Aleksander_M_Vice Dean_STEM_UJ)

The discourses of both the RPOs' interviewees suggest that an important role in recruitment and career evaluation and progression is played by the 'social and political capital', as well as by social ties and the commitment to work with senior members of the discipline, who control careers (Pezzoni et al., 2012). At times this emerges explicitly in a veiled manner. Some KIs indirectly admit that formal criteria are somehow secondary to the opinion of the head of the unit (e.g., an institute or a project team) in which the promotion or employment takes place. Domik stressed that before making the decision, the members of a selection committee

> want to know with whom the team leader is willing to cooperate, because it is cooperation after all. You can't hire a person with whom, as it turns out later, you can't cooperate. This is a very general opinion, whether this is a person with whom the manager of the team, for which the person is hired, sees the possibility of fruitful cooperation or not. (Domik_M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UJ)

Another respondent makes a similar comment when he admits that the role of the promotion commission, which he is a member of, is purely formal and comes down to approving the suggestion/decision of the head of the unit in which the candidate up for promotion works; after all, it is the head of the unit who requests the promotion:

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> I have the impression that it is quite such a procedure, that it is a formal pure, pure formality, that we are there to pat it, not to advise or express our opinion. Anyway, frankly speaking, I would feel strange if I had to decide on employees of an institute other than mine, because I don't know these people, and these opinions are usually meaningless, so to speak. These are not… I rarely have the feeling that I can see who this person is, and in fact the director of the institute asks us to confirm his choice. (Jacek_M_Head of Institute_SSH_UJ)

In the Italian recruitment procedure the unit leader's opinion is also significant. Some members of public competitions in the Italian sample argued that discretionality in selection and evaluation procedures is not only unavoidable, but also desirable, not to favour their 'own' candidates, but because only the scientific community of peers can select who actually deserves to be admitted (Picardi, 2020):

> I believe that margins of discretionality should absolutely not be reduced, because I believe that we must take responsibility. (…) Those who don't do are bad members of that scientific community. Those who use discretion to reward their own 'horses' betrays the mission of university professors. But this is not, let's say, it should not justify the limitation of our discretion because only we can evaluate who deserves to become part of our community. (Giancarlo_M_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO)

CRITICAL THINKING AND AMBIVALENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS EXCELLENCE

Many respondents are critical of the binding criteria of excellence and productivity. A recurring theme is the problem with reconciling the demand of frequent and good publication with teaching duties. In this context the respondents make requests to reduce their teaching load, because it makes it impossible for them to focus on scientific work as much as they are expected to. In the Polish sample, this is found mainly among men, while in some female narratives (Marianna_F_30_EC_SSH_UJ and Alicja_F_46_AC_SSH_UJ) there were also critical reflections on the lack of valorisation of teaching activities as a merit indicator:

> Everything that is outside, some additional work with students (…). If someone is doing that, they are doing it solely at the expense of their time and their own effort. It was never raised as a valuable thing, it was never connected with additional privileges, benefits, anything. (Alicja_F_46_AC_SSH_UJ)

Another problem concerns the negative consequence of the quantitative, point-based approach for assessing academic work, focused on productivity, in terms of publishing in high-ranking journals and obtaining grants. UJ researchers called this 'punctosis', indicating a disease afflicting the contemporary

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academic world. There is much criticism about this development, in terms of the marketisation of science, in which citations and publications in highly scored journals, which charge high fees for publications, count. At the same time, these publishing agencies are private corporations that are not geared towards popularising science, but profit. One of the advanced-career SSH researchers said that the focus on publishing in highly ranked journals distracts from other important aspects of scientific activity, and may negatively impact the quality of knowledge and science:

> If someone conducts important research that brings us closer to understanding reality, but which is not published (…) or is not the result of obtaining a grant, I think this is completely overlooked. All research activity is not noticed until it is associated with obtaining an appropriate number of points. Critical reflection towards this system is also pushed to the sidelines. (Alicja_F_46_AC_SSH_UJ)

Like Alicja, the early-career Marcin thinks that the requirement to publish in high-profile journals can be unethical, as it fuels the profits of corporations, rather than improving the material condition of authors:

> A large extent of corporations make a fortune from publishing (…) hundreds of millions of pounds, in profit. And that's built on our work, where we, if it goes well, have access to an article that we've written and someone else is making money on (…) I think our work is largely exploited and not properly rewarded (…) And if someone wants to monetise my work, I think that's unfair. On the other hand, it is required of us. (Marcin_M_37_EC_SSH_UJ)

When asked what 'good scientific publications' mean in his field (and in his department), Jacek also expresses criticism. He criticises the principle of ranking people according to the number of points they receive for publications:

> I am personally a strong opponent of what happened and the creation of employee rankings due to the points that are obtained depending on where it is published (…) if I hire someone, I would like that someone writes about these topics which one declares that he or she knows and those that we need, also consistency of these publications with the didactic and research area that we need. This is the most important thing for me. (Jacek_M_Head of Institute_SSH_UJ)

Rafał acknowledges that the current point-based evaluation system for scientists works well, particularly in making it harder to accumulate points through weak publications or low-ranking journals. He sees this as a positive change. However, he also highlights the risks of arbitrariness in the system, especially in how journal rankings are created. He cites the case in Poland, where the political influences on the creation of ranked journal lists raised concerns about their quality and fairness: 'How the list is created is a different

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topic, in my opinion, not in the best way, moreover, many people think that the list is not very well constructed, and this (evaluation) is based on it' (Rafał_M_49_AC_STEM_UJ).

Aleksander (M_Vice Dean_STEM_UJ), another STEM respondent, points out that there are high requirements for promotions in the department where he works, often higher than those found in general legislation. One example is the requirement for a long-term internship abroad. This specificity is also emphasised by Anna, who—while having a position in a STEM institute—is a social science graduate:

> I feel at this institute as a person who is doing the bare minimum, because I don't know if anyone looks at the projects [laughs]. The publications are certainly looked at by everyone. It seems to me that our internal evaluation is more restrictive than the interim evaluation. I'm definitely in some of the lower minimum of what is expected in terms of publication production. I usually have two publications a year from the so-called Philadelphia list and that is the minimum. You know, this is an institute (…) an environment that's difficult to compare to because they have a different productivity. They write publications differently than we do. They have differently scored journals. It's difficult to compare, but we are nevertheless compared. (Anna_F_39_EC_STEM_UJ)

Based on the interviews with the 16 early-career researchers, the UNITO results confirm previous studies which show that early-career stages are significantly marked by the requirement of very high productivity levels and the ideal of individual entrepreneurship (Murgia and Poggio, 2018).

Regarding recruitment and promotion criterions, models of scientific excellence, and evaluation processes, the interviewees recurrently focus on 'productivity', usually in terms of (a high number of) publications. This is seen by the interviewees as one of the most important factors in advancing in an academic profession. Less emphasis is placed on the 'quality', 'innovation', and 'originality' of publications, research results, and activities. Several interviewees talk about the pressure to publish quickly being perceived as an element to the detriment of the quality of their research and publications: 'disconnection between, on the one hand, the need for research to be done well […] and the need to immediately produce results in terms of publications' (Nadia_F_42_EC_SSH_UNITO).

GENDER ASSUMPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSTRUCT OF EXCELLENCE

When discussing gender discrimination in universities, a consistent number of academics in top management in both universities—UNITO and UJ—mentioned existing national and institutional regulations ensuring that gender does

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not prevent selection or recruitment. Policies like excluding maternity leave from evaluations are in place, but Italian and Polish academics in management roles noted that the issue lies not in the absence of regulations, but in the male-biased evaluation system and patriarchal societal norms that hinder women's professional progress. For example, Jacek stated, 'Our department probably does not differ from others in that the same is expected of a man and a woman (…) we live in a patriarchal society that simply makes it difficult for women' (Jacek_M_Head of Institute_SSH_UJ), adding that promotion procedures don't address these challenges. He also questioned whether the prominence of visible female leaders, like institute heads or deans, obscures the real issues. Giancarlo pointed out that gender inequality is not a matter of legislation but rather requires cultural change in people's thinking. In his words: 'regulations themselves do not ensure gender equality, a cultural change in people's way of thinking can do it' (Giancarlo_M_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO).

Regarding the Polish sample, most of the interviewees support an academic career model based on competitiveness, which aims to select the best skilled and talented people, those who most closely fit the criteria of academic excellence. According to this assumption, success is determined by various types of necessary social or personality capitals. In STEM, they are more often located biologically ('not everyone has predispositions', 'not everyone has to be a scientist') and they reward a kind of 'natural selection', while in SSH, the decisive condition is more often a good organisation of work and management of one's resources. What does not appear in the narratives, but emerges in the course of the analysis, is precisely the question of the invisible, gendered part of the input resources—the internalised set of gender roles and expectations, as well as the output costs, that is, the unequal burden that women and men incur in order to fit into these academic criteria without having to give up family life and work–life balance.

In the context of questioning whether academic and scientific requirements differ for men and women, most respondents agreed that they are and should be the same for everyone. However, a diversity of opinions emerged regarding the consequences of this apparent neutrality. Several interviewees emphasised that the promotion system overlooks the situations of individuals with families, particularly women who take maternity leave and have caregiving responsibilities. Both SSH and STEM researchers recognised the inequality this creates, often leading to different career trajectories. Many could recall examples of women who, after returning from maternity or childcare leave, either did not continue their careers or worked in lower positions, while male colleagues advanced more effectively. Despite acknowledging these differences, opinions varied on how to address them. Some respondents, both male and female, naturalised the inequality, attributing it to physiology, suggesting

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that women naturally face greater burdens due to childbirth. This may lead to admiration from their male colleagues, but it is important to note that admiration is not a measure of merit. This individualistic view, expressed by some female researchers, both in early- and advanced-career positions, was framed more as a personal challenge rather than a systemic issue compared to men. In their narratives, balancing family and academic careers was often seen as an individual difficulty, rather than in the context of an unfair difference to be recognised as 'excellent' compared to men, even those who are fathers.

> On average, not in every case, but in the case of women who decide to have children, biologically speaking, their burden is significantly greater than men who decide to have children. And this is evident, but it also evokes my admiration, again on average, not in every case, women who have children, in my opinion, are much better organised at work than individuals who do not have children or men who have children but do not take care of them anyway. Somehow, in some way, it further necessitates the appreciation of every bit of time. (Rafał_M_49_AC_STEM_UJ)

From both the Italian and Polish interviews it emerges that women abandon (or they are believed to abandon) their jobs in academia more frequently than men; this is especially true in the STEM departments.

> The requirements are not differentiated, with all the consequences, meaning career breaks associated with having a child, and then having to combine professional work with childcare (…) The fact that I am now advancing my academic career with constraints related to having children is not taken into account in any way (…) From what I observe, there are cases of girls who did their doctorates, gave birth during or after, and now they deal with technical matters. (…) Just look at how many women with doctoral degrees work in secretariats. (…) They didn't do their doctorate to sit in the secretariat (…) not continuing their academic careers. (…) We have a lot of technical staff, women too, who have doctoral degrees. (Anna_F_39_EC_STEM_UJ)

Italian interviewees acknowledged the existence of the 'leaky pipeline' and 'glass ceiling' phenomena, stating that the academic reform implemented by Law n. 240, together with the national evaluation system based too much on quantitative criteria, did not contribute to lessening them. In the Italian sample, Natalia (F_38_EC_STEM_UNITO)—similarly to Anna (F_39_EC_STEM_UJ)—mentioned a couple of colleagues who have left their research career because it is not easily reconciled with family. Genoveffa herself is going to abandon her academic career for a more secure job in a public school, despite her passion for research work, due to academic job insecurity and the sacrifices that would be required to continue, including the need to change research topics (since her actual topic is 'marginal') and go abroad. A number of early-career researchers are considering or planning to leave their academic

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career. While the main reason for this is mostly related to the need of job security and stability, linked to the fear of remaining unemployed (see Chapter 4), some of the early-career researchers are considering giving up because they think they cannot reach the high academic and disciplinary standards to achieve excellence and productivity, since academic work requires almost total availability and dedication (Anzivino and Musumeci, 2025). For example, Genoveffa affirms:

> The truth is that I think that to continue researching (omissis) in the right way, I would really have to drop everything, go abroad, change the subject and devote one hundred per cent of my energy to that, and right now I don't want to do that. (Genoveffa_F_32_EC_STEM_UNITO)

Aleksander (M_Vice Dean_STEM_UJ) highlights that maternity leave is considered and even recognised during employee evaluations. Similarly, the Italian KI Piero (M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) mentioned that his department is sensitive to not excluding candidates due to maternity leave or sick leave. However, he underlined that family burdens negatively impact the careers of young female researchers, particularly because of the 'full-availability culture'. He specified that older female researchers, who sacrificed personal lives for academic success, often fail to understand the needs of younger colleagues. Roberto (M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) also observed gender inequalities early in competitions, with most applicants and shortlisted candidates being men. Female AC and EC researchers emphasised the 'motherhood penalty' linked to the unconditional worker model and career criteria like productivity and mobility.

These factors, together with the job insecurity that characterises the early stages of academic careers in the Italian academic system, significantly affect reproductive decisions, as in the case of Carlotta (F_35_EC_SSH_UNITO), who says 'I am a 35 year old woman (…) will I be able to have a child?' and Agata (F_34_EC_STEM_UNITO), who is currently childless but would like children in the future, although she is worried about the consequences of motherhood on her scientific productivity. With regard to mobility and travelling, a female interviewee says: 'They (her husband's employers) would leave my husband at home, they wouldn't tell him "go and get a year's leave to follow your wife", it's unthinkable' (Natalia_F_38_EC_STEM_UNITO).

While the Italian male early-career researchers are found to be 'gender blind' more frequently than female researchers at the same career level and male researchers in advanced-career positions, thinking there are no gender asymmetries and discrimination in recruitment and career progress in their own department, they consider the criteria of 'excellence' as rather neutral with respect to gender, as well as the impacts/consequences that these criteria

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have on work–life balance. And when recognising these, several tend to minimise their impact on a career.

Another Italian interviewee, Emanuela (F_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO), noticed a gender difference in the evaluation commission and in the selection and promotion procedures from Grade A to C she took part in: when they are also composed of female professors, they tend to hire more female researchers.

Roberto (M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO) highlights the low visibility of women in his field, citing an international conference where only three out of 95 speakers were women. He attributes this lack of visibility to the evaluation system, which he believes was designed by men for men and promotes an 'aggressive' competitive approach to science, while women tend to favour a more cooperative, relational approach. He also points out that the emphasis on international mobility excludes young female researchers. The few women that became Full Professors in his field of study are not considered capable of spreading a different kind of leadership, as they adopted the male model to succeed in their careers. Moreover, when looking at the data of his department, the respondent confirmed the negative trend and explained that the absence of women in almost all grades is due to the huge workload foreseen for success in academia. In his words:

> We must stop placing excessive emphasis on the factory, on the product, on workaholic approach: it is scientifically demonstrable that it harms women more than men. If the prospect is that of having to hang around for six years killing oneself with work day and night, seven days a week, to produce twenty-four jobs before passing the threshold, women give up. There will always be enough fanatical men ready to accept, but I don't think there will be the same number of women. (Roberto_M_Member of Selection Commission_STEM_UNITO)

A female Italian head of department talked about gender stereotypes and negative beliefs and how women attain leadership positions: not due to merit or because they are thought of as 'excellent' and capable, but because they have provided sexual favours to powerful top position men in academia. She says that she had to face endless stereotypes and difficulties. Her experience is exemplary of some of the mechanisms of discrediting women's abilities, and in fact it didn't take long for it to be rumoured that she had reached such a top position due to her supposed personal relationships with important men in the university:

> No one would ever think… (*omissis*) an ordinary senior man in his subject or a… But not even a young researcher, I don't know how to say it. No one would ever think that. Of me, instead, of me has been thought of. Apart from the… all the sentimental gossip, right? So I've had more lovers than… (…) (laughing) (…) when I was appointed in this top-management position obviously among the rumours that

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have been circulating is that (…) had an affair with the rector. (Teresa_F_Member of Selection Commission_SSH_UNITO)

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis based on 68 interviews conducted with SSH and STEM researchers and academics in governance roles at UNITO in Italy and UJ in Poland, reveals how merit and excellence, far from being objective or neutral concepts, are shaped by broader social, cultural, and political forces, confirming previous studies. In the context of neoliberal academia, these concepts often serve to reinforce existing power structures, including gender and class inequalities. The pressure to conform to an ideal of measurable academic performance disadvantages individuals who do not fit the traditional model of success, particularly women. The Italian and Polish academic systems are partly configured as cooptation systems, with hiring and promotion decisions made at the local level, often favouring internal department affiliations. The analysis highlights several critical perspectives from researchers in both academic settings regarding the pressures and challenges associated with the prevailing criteria for academic excellence and productivity.

The recurring critique is the system's focus on productivity at the expense of research quality, academic freedom, and other dimensions of scholarly work. Many feel that the current evaluation system, driven by quantifiable metrics such as publication points, fails to account for the broader purposes of academic work, including teaching, community engagement, and intellectual creativity.

Women are more aware that a neutral concept of merit has disadvantageous gender implications for women, although some limits of the merely quantitative aspects of evaluation processes are also recognised by men; some of the researchers, across all the categories, both early-career and advanced, also recognise them, especially those in SSH fields (but not only) in the two contexts.

One difference between the two contexts is the way of approaching early careers. In Poland, early-career researchers' merit is evaluated on measurable criteria, soft skills, and 'potential', with senior recommendations. For advanced researchers the focus is on academic achievements. In contrast, both groups in Italy are judged on scientific productivity and international mobility.

The analysis also explores gender dynamics and their impact on the academic career progression of women in both institutions. While some national and institutional policies are in place to support gender equality, the reality is that women in academia still face significant structural and societal challenges linked to ingrained cultural and societal norms affecting women's careers. These challenges, which include the burden of caregiving, biases in the evaluation of academic work, and gendered leadership stereotypes, continue to

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impede the professional advancement of women in both universities. Even though women are not explicitly discriminated against in terms of recruitment, their personal and family responsibilities often complicate their ability to meet the expectations of a system that values 'full availability' and high productivity.

These results suggest that the systems of merit and excellence need critical reevaluation to address their biases and limitations. Addressing these issues requires not only policy changes but also a cultural shift within academia, in order to better accommodate the diverse needs and responsibilities of all scholars, regardless of gender.

NOTE

1. For privacy reasons, the names used are fictitious. The other abbreviations refer to: gender (M: Male; F: Female), age and career stage in case of researchers (EC: Early Career; AC: Advanced Career) or type of role in case of key informants (such as the Vice Dean, the Head of an Institute or a Member of a Selection Commission for Hiring or Promoting Researchers), disciplinary field (SSH: Social Sciences and Humanities; STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), and research organisation of the interview (UNITO: University of Turin, in Italy; UJ: Jagiellonian University, in Poland).

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