

Planning Precarity? Academic Labour, Workforce Governance and the Production of Hierarchy in Turkish Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines academic staff development and employment in the context of Turkish higher education by focusing on how academic labour is experienced through staffing arrangements, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment conditions. Rather than treating academic staff as the aggregate of individual career trajectories, the study approaches the academic workforce as a structural issue related to its reproduction, distribution, and sustainability within higher education. Drawing on a qualitative study with a phenomenological orientation, the article is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 academic staff members working in faculties of education at three public universities in different regions of Türkiye. The findings point to three interrelated dynamics: hierarchical imbalance and the uneven distribution of academic labour, uncertainty in appointment and promotion processes, and the expansion of precarious employment arrangements. These dynamics suggest that, in the cases examined, academic staff development is experienced as being shaped by fragmented workforce planning arrangements and employment conditions through which precarity is reproduced and hierarchical inequalities are reinforced. The study contributes to critical higher education research by offering context-bound insights into how academic labour, workforce governance, and precarity intersect in the reproduction of academic hierarchy.

Keywords: *Academic labour, precarity, neoliberal university, academic employment, Turkish higher education*

Introduction

Universities' core functions depend not only on the production and advancement of knowledge but also on the conditions under which academic staff are developed, employed, and sustained within higher education systems. For this reason, academic staff development cannot be reduced to a narrow administrative matter of staffing or recruitment; it also constitutes a structural issue that shapes institutional capacity, academic continuity, and the long-term sustainability of higher education. In recent years, the growing use of the concept of the academic workforce has reflected a broader shift towards understanding academic staff as a strategic field requiring institutional planning rather than as the simple sum of individual careers (Salmon, 2024). At the same time, research on higher education systems has increasingly shown that academic careers are shaped by workload pressures, contractual insecurity, and uneven employment conditions, particularly at early career stages, making academic staff development inseparable from broader questions of planning, career continuity, and employment structures (OECD, 2024; de la Torre et al., 2016).

In the Turkish context, these questions have gained particular significance in parallel with the rapid expansion of higher education. Official data indicate the continued growth of the system and point to important shifts in the composition of the academic workforce, including the distribution of academic ranks and the place of early-career positions within the hierarchy (Council of Higher Education [YÖK], 2025). This expansion has raised critical questions about the extent to which academic staff development is supported by stable, coherent, and long-term arrangements for the renewal of academic labour. Existing

research in Türkiye suggests that increasingly demanding academic career conditions, the limited availability of secure positions, and the growing reliance on temporary or insecure forms of employment have deepened uncertainty in academic career trajectories (Bakır & Eroğlu, 2019; Baştuğ & Beşirli, 2022; Karakütük et al., 2008). In this respect, academic staff development in Türkiye can be approached not merely as a matter of quantitative growth, but as a structural question shaped by hierarchy, insecurity, and uneven employment conditions within higher education.

In the international literature, academic staff development is increasingly discussed through concepts such as the academic workforce, academic careers, and employment regimes in higher education. This body of research suggests that academic staff cannot be understood simply in terms of individual achievement or career progression, because academic work is also shaped by institutional capacity, staffing structures, and the conditions under which academic careers are sustained over time (Enders, 2007; Salmon, 2024). At the same time, recent studies show that the expansion of higher education has often been accompanied by insecure employment conditions, intensified performance pressures, and growing precarity, especially for academics in early career stages (Crutchley et al., 2024; OECD, 2024). Taken together, these discussions indicate that academic staff development should be examined not only as a matter of training and recruitment, but also in relation to the employment arrangements and institutional conditions through which the academic workforce is reproduced.

Although existing research has drawn attention to important problems such as precarious employment, research assistants' insecurity, and difficulties in academic careers, these issues have largely been examined as separate problem areas in both Turkish and international literature (Bakır & Eroğlu, 2019; Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Crutchley et al., 2024). This fragmentation has limited a more integrated understanding of how academic staff development and

employment are shaped through the combined effects of hierarchy, uncertainty, and precarious employment. Rather than treating these issues as isolated problems, this study examines them as interconnected dimensions of a structural question concerning the reproduction of academic labour. By drawing on the accounts of academic staff working in faculties of education at three public universities in Türkiye, the article offers a qualitative and context-bound analysis of how academic hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment are experienced as mutually reinforcing dimensions of academic workforce governance.

Academic Labour, Precarity, and Workforce Reproduction in Higher Education

Academic staff development in higher education cannot be treated simply as a matter of postgraduate training or institutional staffing needs. It must also be understood in relation to academic labour and to the conditions under which that labour is sustained over time. This is particularly important in the context of the neoliberal university, where academic work is increasingly reorganised through managerial control, performance pressures, and insecure employment relations. From this perspective, the academic workforce refers not merely to the sum of individual careers, but to the structured conditions through which academic labour is organised, renewed, and reproduced within higher education systems (Salmon, 2024). Approaching academic staff development in this way makes it possible to analyse it not only as a question of supplying academic staff, but also as part of the casualisation and restructuring of academic labour under conditions of precarity (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015; Dafermos, 2023).

Under neoliberal forms of governance, the problem of academic staff development extends beyond the question of how many academics are trained or employed. It also concerns how academic labour is retained, differentiated,

distributed, and made secure or insecure within the university. In this article, workforce planning is not treated narrowly as a formal policy document or a technical exercise of staff allocation. It is understood more broadly as the set of institutional and policy arrangements through which academic positions are distributed, career progression is regulated, and employment security is differentially organised across the academic hierarchy. Critical scholarship has shown that neoliberal restructuring governs academic work through intensified managerial control, metric-based performance regimes, market-oriented forms of regulation, and flexible forms of labour that expand precarious employment while weakening the material basis of academic autonomy (Dafermos, 2023; Eren, 2025; Ulutaş, 2021). From this perspective, academic staff development cannot be treated as a neutral planning matter. It must be understood in relation to the political and institutional arrangements through which academic labour is reorganised, rendered unequal, and increasingly exposed to insecurity within higher education.

A critical question in academic staff development concerns the disjuncture between postgraduate education and stable academic employment. The expansion of postgraduate training may increase the supply of potential academics, yet it does not by itself secure the continuity of the academic workforce. When stable employment, career continuity, and institutional attachment are not sustained in parallel, academic staff development becomes detached from the long-term reproduction of academic labour (Burton & Bowman, 2022). International research has shown that this disjuncture produces early-career uncertainty, temporary employment, and weakened institutional attachment among emerging academics (Brami et al., 2023; Crutchley et al., 2024; OECD, 2024; Skakni et al., 2025). Under such conditions, postgraduate education risks functioning less as a means of sustaining academic capacity than as a channel through which precarious academic labour is continually reproduced.

In the Turkish higher education context, these dynamics have become increasingly salient. The rapid expansion of higher education has increased the scale of the system, but this expansion has not been matched by a coherent framework for the long-term continuity and reproduction of the academic workforce. Existing research points to the persistence of insecure and temporary forms of employment, especially in positions such as 50/d research assistantships, a fixed-term research assistant status in Türkiye that is tied to postgraduate enrolment and may end following doctoral completion, as well as to wider uncertainties surrounding academic careers and advancement (Aydın & Özeren, 2019; Bakır & Eroğlu, 2019; Baştuğ & Beşirli, 2022; Öztürk & Yıldırım, 2025). This pattern also recalls Bourdieu's (1988) analysis of the academic field as a structured space of unequal positions, in which continuity, advancement, and recognition are unevenly distributed through struggles over position, legitimacy, and autonomy within academia (Wacquant, 1990). In this context, academic staff development in Türkiye appears less as a stable process of sustaining academic labour than as a field structured by uneven arrangements that distribute security, continuity, and advancement unequally across academic positions. It is within this context that the present study examines academic staff development and employment as interconnected dimensions of a structural problem concerning the reproduction of the academic workforce in Turkish higher education.

Against this background, the present study examines how academic staff experience the conditions through which academic labour is distributed, sustained, and rendered precarious within the context of Turkish higher education. The study does not analyse workforce planning as a formal policy process in itself; rather, it investigates how staffing arrangements, promotion uncertainty, hierarchical positioning, and precarious employment are lived and interpreted by academics working in faculties of education at three public universities. In doing so, the article brings academic hierarchy, advancement

uncertainty, and employment insecurity into a common analytical frame and explores how these dynamics are experienced as shaping the reproduction of academic labour in practice.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine academic staff development and employment in the context of Turkish higher education through the experiences of academic staff working in faculties of education at public universities. A phenomenologically oriented approach was employed to explore how academic staff make sense of hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment conditions in their professional lives. In this respect, the study focuses on individual career experiences as situated accounts of how broader structural conditions are lived, interpreted, and negotiated within academic work.

In this study, phenomenology is used in an interpretive sense, with attention to the meanings academics attribute to their experiences within specific institutional and employment conditions (Patton, 2014). The phenomenon under investigation is how academic staff development and employment are experienced under conditions shaped by hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, insecurity, and uneven employment arrangements. Because questions of academic labour are often framed at the macro level through staffing policies, institutional regulations, and employment structures, a phenomenologically oriented approach makes it possible to examine how these broader arrangements are experienced in everyday academic life. This approach enables the analysis to move beyond formal staffing categories and to illuminate how academic staff interpret the structural conditions affecting continuity, advancement, and security in their professional trajectories. The aim is therefore not to make

statistical or nationwide generalisations, but to develop context-bound insights that may be transferable to similar higher education settings.

Participants

The study group consists of 12 academic staff members working in faculties of education at three public universities located in different geographical regions of Türkiye. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure variation in institutional settings, academic ranks, and career stages relevant to the study of academic staff development and employment. The participants included professors, associate professors, lecturers, and research assistants. This variation made it possible to examine how hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment conditions are experienced from different positions within academic life.

Faculties of education were selected because they provide a coherent institutional context for examining academic staff development, professional formation, and the reproduction of educational labour. As institutions responsible for teacher education and educational research, they are closely connected to wider debates on public education, professional preparation, and the organisation of academic work. This focus also constitutes a limitation of the study, since the findings should not be read as representing all academic fields or all higher education institutions in Türkiye.

The size of the participant group is consistent with the logic of qualitative and phenomenologically oriented research, which aims to develop an in-depth understanding of shared experiential patterns rather than statistical generalisation. Participant recruitment continued until recurring patterns across interviews suggested that sufficient depth had been reached for the purposes of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences of academic staff development and employment, with particular attention to hierarchy, staffing arrangements, promotion uncertainty, precarious employment, job security, workload, and future career expectations. The interview protocol was informed by the literature on academic labour, precarity, academic staff development, and higher education governance, while also allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered significant in their own academic trajectories.

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic procedure consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study. The interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's account. Meaningful statements related to participants' experiences of hierarchy, uncertainty, employment security, workload, advancement, and institutional belonging were then identified and coded. These codes were compared across the dataset, grouped into sub-themes, and then organised under broader themes that captured recurring experiential patterns. The coding process was both inductive and theoretically informed: initial coding remained close to participants' narratives, while later stages of interpretation related the emerging patterns to the conceptual literature on academic labour, precarity, workforce governance, and the reproduction of hierarchy. Direct quotations were used to preserve the texture and authenticity of participants' experiences and to show how the themes were grounded in the empirical material. To ensure confidentiality, participants were anonymised using numerical codes (K1, K2, K3, etc.), and the findings were interpreted by emphasising common experiential patterns rather than individual or institutional identities.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed by drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was strengthened through face-to-face interviews, repeated reading of the transcripts, the use of direct quotations, and the inclusion of participants from different universities and academic ranks. These strategies made it possible to examine academic staff development and employment across diverse institutional and professional positions. Transferability was addressed by providing contextual information about the institutional settings, academic ranks, career stages of the participants, and the specific focus on faculties of education, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was supported through the systematic use of the interview protocol and transparent documentation of the coding and theme development processes. Confirmability was enhanced through an external review conducted by an academic with expertise in qualitative research, who examined the coherence between the data, codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Reflexivity was also considered during the research process. Since the study concerns academic labour and employment conditions within higher education, the researcher's own position within the academic field required particular attention. During analysis, interpretations were checked against the interview data in order to avoid imposing theoretical assumptions on participants' accounts. The use of direct quotations and the external review process helped to maintain a close connection between the empirical material and the conceptual interpretation.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process.

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, and participants' personal information was kept confidential in accordance with ethical principles. Institutional and personal identifiers were

removed from the presentation of findings in order to protect participants' anonymity.

Findings

In this section, the findings are presented under three main themes that illuminate how participants experienced academic staff development and employment through hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment conditions within the cases examined. The analysis is organised under the headings “*Hierarchical Imbalance and the Uneven Distribution of Academic Labour*,” “*Promotion Uncertainty and the Unequal Logic of Academic Advancement*,” and “*Precarious Employment, Merit Erosion, and the Governance of Academic Labour*.” Across these themes, seven sub-themes were identified. The first theme comprises *staff imbalance, insufficient numbers of academic staff, and workload*; the second includes *uncertainty in criteria and the academic title phenomenon*; and the third includes *merit erosion and job security/insecurity*. The thematic structure of the findings and the distribution of sub-themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes on the Reproduction of Academic Labour in Turkish Higher Education

Hierarchical Imbalance and the Uneven Distribution of Academic Labour	Staff Imbalance
	Insufficient Numbers of Academic Staff
	Workload
Promotion Uncertainty and the Unequal Logic of Academic Advancement	Uncertainty in Criteria
	The Academic Title Phenomenon
Precarious Employment, Merit Erosion, and the Governance of Academic Labour	Merit Erosion
	Job Security and Insecurity

Hierarchical Imbalance and the Uneven Distribution of Academic Labour

This theme examines how participants described the hierarchical distribution of academic staff within universities and the structural consequences of this distribution for academic labour. Their accounts indicate that academic positions are distributed unevenly across ranks and departments, that lower academic positions remain limited, and that this imbalance intensifies workload in ways that directly shape academic work. In this respect, the issue appeared not only as a quantitative shortage of staff, but also as an uneven distribution of academic labour across ranks and departments.

Participants frequently emphasised that academic positions are not allocated according to actual institutional needs. Instead, they described a concentration of certain academic titles in some departments alongside the marked limitation of others, particularly lower-level positions. Newly opened positions were also seen as being distributed unevenly across departments. These accounts suggest that participants did not perceive the academic hierarchy as following a balanced or regenerative structure; rather, they described an uneven pattern that weakens the continuity of academic labour and intensifies pressure on positions located lower in the hierarchy.

“The distribution of academic staff is inflated and uneven. In some departments, there are excessive numbers of staff holding the same academic rank. These imbalances are clearly visible; while some departments have seven or eight professors, they may have only one or two staff members in other ranks.” (K1, Research Assistant)

Participants’ accounts also indicate that the academic hierarchy is expected to reproduce itself through a pyramidal structure in which lower academic positions remain numerically stronger and sustain renewal over time. In this sense, lower ranks were described not simply as entry points into academia, but as positions that secure the continuity of academic labour and the future renewal of faculties. However, participants’ accounts suggest that this pyramidal

structure has been distorted, with an increasing concentration at senior academic ranks and a corresponding contraction at lower levels.

“In public universities, there are nearly 150,000 academic staff members, around 25,000 of whom are professors and 15,000 associate professors. These figures show that the academic staff structure no longer follows a pyramidal pattern, as the number of professors exceeds that of associate professors.” (K11, Professor)

“At my university, a form of ‘professor inflation’ is emerging. While associate professor and professor positions are relatively numerous, assistant professor, research assistant, and lecturer positions remain limited.” (K2, Research Assistant)

This imbalance has important consequences for the reproduction of the academic workforce. Participants emphasised that the restriction of lower academic positions, especially research assistantships and assistant professorships, weakens faculties’ capacity to renew academic labour over time. In this respect, participants experienced the limitation of lower ranks as more than a staffing issue; it was also linked to weakened continuity and narrower institutional bases for sustaining new academic labour.

“The number of academic staff in my faculty is insufficient, particularly at the levels of research assistants and assistant professors. Many departments therefore need to renew their academic staff.” (K5, Lecturer)

The same pattern also intensifies the workload carried by those already employed in limited positions. Participants noted that the absence of new appointments forces existing staff to carry heavy teaching loads across multiple programmes, thereby reducing both the quality of teaching and the time available for research. Here, participants linked the unequal distribution of academic positions to both restricted renewal and the redistribution of academic labour in ways that deepened pressure on those already located in constrained parts of the hierarchy.

“Because no new positions are being opened, many academics have to teach five or six different courses for more than 30 hours a week. In such cases, either teaching becomes inefficient or academic research suffers.” (K4, Lecturer)

The effects of intensified workload extend beyond teaching itself and shape the broader conditions under which academic labour is carried out. Participants indicated that heavy teaching loads, combined with rising student numbers, reduce the time available for research and make it more difficult to meet promotion criteria. In this sense, participants described workload not only as a matter of task intensity, but as a condition that reduced time for scientific productivity and complicated academic advancement, especially where lower academic positions remained limited.

“For example, even the assessment of a very large class can take a considerable amount of time. When teaching loads are high, the time that academic staff can allocate to scientific research is reduced.” (K7, Associate Professor)

Taken together, these accounts suggest a close relationship between hierarchical imbalance, the limitation of lower academic positions, and the unequal distribution of academic labour. In the faculties described by participants, the concentration of academic positions at senior ranks, alongside the restriction of lower ranks and the insufficiency of staff numbers, intensified workloads in ways that affected teaching, research, and promotion simultaneously. From this perspective, hierarchical imbalance was experienced not merely as an organisational irregularity, but as a condition that weakened the continuity and renewal of academic labour within the cases examined.

Promotion Uncertainty and the Unequal Logic of Academic Advancement

This theme examines how appointment and promotion processes are experienced as uncertain and unequally structured within academic life.

Participants’ accounts indicate that these processes are shaped not only by formal academic qualifications, but also by institutional regulations, norm staff practices, and broader employment arrangements. In this respect, participants described academic advancement less as a linear and predictable process than as one marked by uncertainty and uneven access to continuity and progression.

Participants frequently emphasised that appointment and promotion criteria are revised at short intervals and that expected performance requirements are continually expanded. While some participants regarded these changes as necessary for maintaining academic standards, others described them as a source of uncertainty that makes academic progression more difficult to anticipate and plan. These accounts suggest that the problem lies not only in the existence of criteria themselves, but also in the instability through which they are imposed and experienced across academic positions.

“New requirements are added to appointment and promotion criteria every year. I view these criteria positively; one can prepare accordingly in order to be appointed.” (K11, Professor)

For academics in less secure positions, however, the continual modification of criteria was experienced less as a quality-enhancing mechanism than as a source of uncertainty and pressure. Participants noted that the instability of appointment and promotion requirements makes it difficult to know which expectations will remain valid over time and, therefore, to organise academic work in a predictable way. For these participants, uncertainty was not only a matter of not knowing which rules would remain in place; it also affected how they planned their work, responded to performance expectations, and imagined the possibility of advancement.

“Appointment and promotion criteria are revised every year. As a result, I constantly feel that I need to exceed the required conditions. This sometimes causes me to feel anxious.” (K6, Lecturer)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that appointment and promotion criteria do not carry the same meaning across the academic hierarchy. Professors in secure positions tended to interpret stricter criteria as manageable requirements that support academic quality, whereas academics in earlier and more precarious stages of their careers experienced the same instability as a source of uncertainty and anxiety. This pattern suggests that the effects of appointment and promotion

criteria are shaped less by their formal content than by the unequal structural positions from which academics encounter them.

Participants' narratives also reveal that meeting formal criteria does not necessarily lead to advancement. In particular, norm staff practices can make staff availability more decisive than academic qualifications, thereby reinforcing the perception that academic effort does not reliably translate into progression. Under such conditions, advancement appears not simply as a matter of merit or performance, but as a process conditioned by structural constraints that interrupt the expected relationship between achievement and mobility.

“Meeting the criteria does not mean that you will be appointed. For example, at our university the required score for appointment to the position of assistant professor is 120, whereas I have over 1,000 points, yet promotion may still not take place.” (K5, Lecturer)

These accounts indicate that appointment and promotion processes are shaped not only by academic performance, but also by structural constraints that interrupt the expected relationship between achievement and advancement.

Under such conditions, the inability to progress despite meeting formal criteria can weaken both motivation and institutional attachment, particularly for academics whose positions are already marked by insecurity.

Participants further linked these uncertainties to the wider meaning of academic titles within the hierarchy. In their accounts, academic titles were described as stages that should ideally mark scholarly development, but that are increasingly experienced as ends in themselves.

“Academic titles should represent stages in a scholarly journey. Today, however, the primary goal appears to be obtaining the title itself. Titles have become a system of reward and punishment, and once the final reward is reached, a form of withdrawal emerges.” (K1, Research Assistant)

“While insecurity is prominent at lower ranks, higher ranks are often characterised by inertia supported by favourable conditions. Professorship can sometimes be perceived as a period of preparation for retirement.” (K2, Research Assistant)

That both accounts were articulated by research assistants is significant, as it shows that critiques of the academic title system emerged from relatively insecure positions within the hierarchy. From these positions, academic titles were not described only as markers of scholarly development; they were also associated with security, recognition, and institutional belonging. The association of professorship with inertia or “preparation for retirement” further indicates that participants perceived an uneven relationship between title, performance, and security within academic life.

Taken together, these findings suggest that participants experienced appointment and promotion processes as uncertain and uneven rather than as fully predictable pathways of academic advancement. Instability in criteria and the constraining effects of norm staff practices weakened the expected relationship between performance and progression. Academic titles were therefore associated not only with scholarly development, but also with access to security, recognition, and institutional belonging. In this respect, promotion uncertainty appeared in participants’ accounts as one of the ways through which inequality was experienced within the academic workforce.

Precarious Employment, Merit Erosion, and the Governance of Academic Labour

This theme examines how participants described academic employment in relation to merit, security, and continuity. Their accounts indicate that academic employment was shaped not only by scholarly qualifications, but also by institutional arrangements and employment conditions that affected who advanced, under what terms, and with what degree of security. A substantial proportion of participants stated that appointment and promotion processes do not operate primarily on the basis of merit. Their accounts suggest that while academic qualifications may be necessary, they are often insufficient on their

own; institutional proximity, informal relational networks, and discretionary decision-making can become decisive in shaping academic advancement.

“Appointment and promotion decisions are largely left to the discretion of university administrations. Academic positions tend to be allocated based on proximity and closeness. Those who are not well connected often receive the titles they deserve one or two years later.” (K1, Research Assistant)

“I believe that appointments to academic positions should be based on objective criteria rather than personal interests or individual relationships; however, this is unfortunately not how the system operates.” (K3, Research Assistant)

These accounts were voiced primarily by research assistants and lecturers, indicating that concerns about merit were most sharply articulated from lower and less secure positions within the hierarchy. For these participants, the problem was not simply whether academic qualifications were formally required, but whether they were sufficient for advancement in contexts where proximity, informal relations, and discretionary decisions were perceived to matter.

The second major dimension of this theme concerns job security and its unequal distribution across the academic hierarchy. Participants consistently described associate professorship and full professorship as comparatively secure positions and viewed access to these ranks as a threshold of safety within academic life. In their accounts, security did not refer only to the continuity of employment; it also signified entry into a position from which academic labour could be carried out with greater stability, institutional belonging, and control over the conditions of one’s academic work.

“It means becoming a part of the university. It means feeling secure in terms of job stability. Instead of constantly accumulating points through rapid and compulsory publications to extend contracts, it means being able to publish in the areas in which I want to specialize.” (K10, Professor)

Participants contrasted promotion phases dominated by points, rapid publication, and contract renewal with more secure positions in which they felt able to pursue sustained research agendas. In this sense, insecurity was associated not

only with employment continuity, but also with limits on intellectual autonomy and longer-term academic planning.

“When we first started as research assistants, this position was permanent, but this is no longer the case. Associate and full professorships remain secure positions, and this security has a positive effect on engaging in scientific research and developing a sense of belonging to the university.” (K11, Professor)

“Having a permanent position primarily means job security and access to full employment rights. It also relieves the material and emotional burden of constantly preparing files for contract renewal.” (K7, Associate Professor)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that job security was closely tied to how academic labour was experienced and sustained, although its meaning varied across positions within the hierarchy. Senior academics associated security with institutional belonging and status-based stability, whereas associate professorship was linked more explicitly to reduced performance pressure and greater autonomy in determining research priorities. Across these accounts, secure employment appeared as a condition that made sustained academic work easier to imagine and pursue. Participants also pointed to the growing reliance on temporary and insecure employment arrangements in universities, including 50/d positions, part-time appointments, and project-based scholarship schemes. These forms of employment were described not simply as unstable contracts, but as arrangements that intensify insecurity, sharpen hierarchy, and deepen power asymmetries within academic life.

“These policies aim to strip people of job security and cultivate a sense of future anxiety in academia. By pushing individuals to focus on survival concerns, they prevent resistance to existing problems and keep academics occupied with personal struggles rather than broader issues.” (K2, Research Assistant)

“These employment policies reinforce hierarchical structures and deepen power inequalities within universities. Part-time employment and project-based scholarships are characterised by low wages and a lack of job security. Although the 50/d position may appear financially equivalent, it exposes academics to the risk of unemployment after doctoral completion. This insecurity reinforces hierarchical relations and can foster practices resembling workplace bullying.” (K3, Research Assistant)

These accounts show that temporary and insecure employment arrangements were experienced as more than contractual instability. For research assistants in particular, 50/d positions, part-time work, and project-based scholarships were associated with future anxiety, dependence on senior academics or administrators, and reduced capacity to act autonomously. Participants linked these arrangements to survival concerns, informal pressures, and vulnerability to practices resembling workplace bullying. In this sense, insecurity was described as affecting not only career continuity, but also the everyday conditions under which academic work could be carried out. Across this theme, participants connected merit, security, and continuity in ways that show how academic employment was experienced unevenly across the hierarchy. For those in lower and less secure positions, insecurity was associated with future anxiety, dependence, and limited room for dissent or intellectual autonomy. For those in more secure positions, employment security was linked to stability, institutional belonging, and greater control over academic work. In this respect, precarious employment, merit erosion, and job security were experienced as closely connected dimensions of academic labour within the cases examined.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that, in the cases examined, academic staff development and employment were experienced through interconnected dynamics rather than as isolated administrative problems. Hierarchical imbalance in the distribution of academic labour, uncertainty in appointment and promotion processes, and the expansion of precarious employment arrangements together indicate that academic staff development is not governed within a stable and coherent framework of continuity and renewal. Instead, these dynamics point to a fragmented mode of governance in which academic labour is distributed unevenly, advancement is rendered uncertain, and security is

differentially allocated across the hierarchy. From this perspective, the problem of academic staff development extends beyond a technical issue of staffing and points to a broader question concerning how academic labour is governed and reproduced in higher education.

The findings related to *Hierarchical Imbalance and the Uneven Distribution of Academic Labour* suggest that, in the cases examined, the distribution of academic positions can be interpreted as part of the structural organisation of the academic field. In Bourdieu's terms, academia is a field organised through unequal positions, struggles over legitimacy, and differentiated access to recognition, continuity, and advancement (Bourdieu, 1988; Wacquant, 1990). From this perspective, the concentration of positions at senior ranks alongside the narrowing of lower-level positions points to an uneven organisation of academic labour in which continuity is weakened at the levels where renewal should be strongest. This interpretation resonates with wider research showing that massification in higher education does not necessarily generate a balanced academic structure; instead, insecurity and workload are often redistributed downward, particularly onto early-career academics and other precarious staff (Kehm & Teichler, 2013; OECD, 2024). It also aligns with critical work showing that casualisation has become a constitutive feature of how the neoliberal university organises labour, visibility, and dependence across its hierarchy (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Mason & Megoran, 2021). In this sense, hierarchical imbalance emerges as a mechanism through which academic labour is differentially valued and unevenly positioned within the university.

The findings further suggest that hierarchical imbalance reshapes the everyday organisation of academic labour by transferring the burdens of continuity downward while narrowing the institutional channels through which renewal can occur. The restriction of research assistant and assistant professor positions weakens faculties' capacity to reproduce academic labour over time, yet the work of teaching, assessment, and administrative maintenance continues to

expand. Under these conditions, lower and less secure positions become the primary carriers of intensified workload, while the possibility of building sustained research trajectories is correspondingly weakened. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that casualised and lower-status academic staff are often expected to absorb heavy teaching responsibilities, remain highly adaptable, and accept forms of labour that are insecure, weakly recognised, and difficult to convert into stable academic futures (Finkelstein et al., 2016; Mason & Megoran, 2021; OECD, 2024). In the cases examined, this suggests that the narrowing of lower ranks did not simply create a shortage at the base of the hierarchy; it also redistributed academic labour in ways that intensified fragility, constrained scholarly development, and weakened the long-term reproduction of the academic workforce.

The findings related to *Promotion Uncertainty and the Unequal Logic of Academic Advancement* suggest that appointment and promotion processes should be understood as unevenly experienced governance mechanisms rather than as stable procedures for evaluating academic quality. The frequent revision of criteria, the escalation of performance expectations, and the difficulty of knowing which requirements will remain valid over time create a condition in which uncertainty itself becomes consequential. In this sense, uncertainty does not operate only as an administrative problem; it functions as a disciplinary environment that keeps academic labour oriented toward continuous adaptation, self-monitoring, and intensified performance. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that metric-based evaluation regimes in higher education tend to produce insecurity, strategic compliance, and the persistent sense that academic work is never sufficient, particularly for those who have not yet reached secure positions (Barnett & Moher, 2019; O’Siochru et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2022). The findings of this study add to that literature by showing that the same criteria are not experienced in the same way across the hierarchy: academics in secure positions are more able to interpret tightening criteria as

manageable standards, whereas those in earlier and more precarious stages encounter them as uncertainty, pressure, and anxiety. In this respect, promotion uncertainty emerges as a structurally unequal condition through which academic advancement is governed.

The findings further suggest that uncertainty in advancement is intensified by the weak and unstable relationship between formal achievement and actual mobility within the academic hierarchy. In the Turkish context, norm staff practices, institutional discretion, and informal networks can interrupt the expected link between meeting criteria and obtaining promotion, making advancement contingent on conditions that exceed academic performance itself (Bakır & Eroğlu, 2019; Baştuğ & Beşirli, 2022; Öztürk & Yıldırım, 2025).

Under these conditions, academic titles cease to function solely as stages of scholarly development and increasingly operate as structural thresholds that regulate access to security, recognition, and institutional belonging. This helps explain why titles are experienced so differently across the hierarchy: for those in insecure positions, they signify not only professional progression but also escape from uncertainty, dependency, and conditional employment. In this respect, the academic title system acquires a reward–punishment logic in which advancement is tied to differential access to stability, while the absence of advancement prolongs precarity and weakens institutional attachment. Read in this way, appointment and promotion processes do not simply evaluate academic worth; they participate in the unequal distribution of security and recognition within academic life (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024; Ivancheva et al., 2019).

The findings related to *Precarious Employment, Merit Erosion, and the Governance of Academic Labour* suggest that precarious forms of academic employment should be understood as mechanisms through which academic labour is governed rather than as merely unstable contractual arrangements. In this study, temporary contracts, project-based scholarships, and employment

under Article 50/d appear as conditions that intensify dependence, redirect attention from scholarly work to survival, and weaken the capacity for dissent. This interpretation is consistent with critical scholarship showing that the neoliberal university increasingly relies on insecure and flexible forms of labour that make academic work more governable by narrowing autonomy, deepening dependency, and normalising fragility across the lower tiers of the hierarchy (Gallas, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2017; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Mason and Megoran (2021) argue that casualisation renders academics vulnerable, less visible, and less able to project themselves into a meaningful future. This point is particularly relevant here because it helps explain why insecurity operates not only as an employment condition but as a mode of dehumanising academic labour itself. Their analysis shows that precarious contracts constrain agency and future orientation in ways that reshape how academic work is lived and valued (Mason & Megoran, 2021). A related point emerges in Uribe-Piedrahita's (2026) phenomenological study, which shows that labour precarity destabilises belonging, identity, and the possibility of sustained engagement with academic work, even when participants continue to invest teaching with personal meaning. Read together, these studies support the interpretation that the precarious arrangements examined in this study operated as a means of governing academic labour through uncertainty, dependency, and the displacement of long-term scholarly horizons.

The findings also indicate that the effects of precarious employment cannot be separated from the erosion of merit and the unequal distribution of job security across the academic hierarchy. In this study, secure employment is associated with greater institutional belonging, reduced performance pressure, and a stronger capacity to shape one's research agenda, whereas insecure positions are marked by dependency, conditionality, and restricted room for intellectual autonomy. This distinction suggests that job security should be understood not simply as a contractual benefit, but as a material condition for sustaining

academic freedom and meaningful scholarly work. Critical analyses of the neoliberal university have similarly shown that the marketisation of higher education weakens collective guarantees, individualises responsibility, and redefines academic value through competition, flexibility, and differential access to recognition (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014).

Within such a context, merit does not function as a neutral principle of evaluation; its meaning is mediated by unequal institutional arrangements that determine whose work is recognised, whose progression is delayed, and whose academic future remains insecure. This helps explain why employment security in the findings is tied not only to stability, but also to the possibility of sustained research, institutional recognition, and professional self-direction. In this sense, academic freedom emerges as a structurally differentiated condition, unevenly distributed according to employment status and hierarchical position rather than equally available to all academics (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Ivancheva et al., 2019).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that, in the cases examined, academic staff development and employment were experienced as being shaped through a fragmented governance logic that distributed labour, security, and advancement unevenly across the academic hierarchy. Hierarchical imbalance, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment do not appear as separate problem areas; rather, they constitute interconnected dimensions of how academic labour is organised, disciplined, and reproduced. From this perspective, the problem of academic staff development cannot be reduced to a question of staffing shortages, institutional inefficiency, or individual career management. It points instead to a broader structural condition in which the continuity of academic labour is weakened, insecurity is normalised, and access to recognition, stability, and academic freedom is differentially allocated. In this respect, the study suggests that the experiences examined here reflect governance arrangements

that privilege short-term management over long-term renewal, producing unequal and fragile conditions for the reproduction of academic labour.

Conclusion And Implications

This study suggests that, in the cases examined, academic staff development and employment were experienced as being shaped through a fragmented governance logic that distributed academic labour, security, and advancement unevenly across the hierarchy. Hierarchical imbalance, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment do not operate as isolated institutional problems; they constitute interconnected dimensions of a broader structural condition concerning how academic labour is organised and reproduced. From this perspective, the problem of academic staff development exceeds a technical question of staffing, recruitment, or career progression. It points instead to the ways in which the continuity of academic labour is weakened, insecurity is normalised, and access to recognition, stability, and academic freedom is differentially structured within higher education.

The main contribution of this study lies in bringing academic staff hierarchy, promotion uncertainty, and precarious employment into a common analytical frame and interpreting them as interconnected dimensions of academic labour governance. In doing so, the study moves beyond approaches that treat staffing distribution, appointment and promotion, or employment insecurity as separate problem areas. Instead, it shows how these dynamics converge in shaping the uneven continuity, recognition, and security of academic work. By drawing on academics' lived experiences in faculties of education at three public universities in Türkiye, the study also contributes a qualitative and experience-based perspective to the literature on academic precarity, showing that insecurity is not simply a background condition of employment but a structuring force that

shapes how academic labour is valued, organised, and sustained within higher education.

These findings carry implications that extend beyond the refinement of appointment criteria or the adjustment of staffing numbers. A more secure and sustainable academic system depends on recognising that the continuity of academic labour cannot be maintained where lower academic positions remain structurally limited, advancement is governed through uncertainty, and employment security is distributed unevenly across the hierarchy. In this respect, the study suggests that efforts to strengthen higher education should focus less on intensifying short-term performance expectations and more on the conditions that make long-term academic work possible, including equitable renewal, secure employment, and stable pathways of professional development. Without such conditions, the reproduction of the academic workforce remains fragile, and the institutional capacity of universities continues to be shaped by insecurity rather than continuity.

Ultimately, the cases examined in this study suggest that academic precarity cannot be reduced to local irregularities or temporary institutional weaknesses. Participants' accounts instead point to a broader pattern in which academic staff development and employment are shaped through fragmented arrangements that weaken continuity and distribute insecurity unevenly across the academic workforce. By analysing academics' lived experiences, this study shows that the central issue lies not in staffing shortages, unstable promotion processes, or temporary contracts considered separately, but in the way these dynamics converge to produce unequal conditions for the reproduction of academic labour. In this respect, the article contributes to critical debates on higher education by showing that academic staff development cannot be separated from the question of whose labour is secured, whose careers remain precarious, and how inequality is institutionally reproduced within the university.

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