

First National Junior Faculty conference identifies barriers and provides suggestions for a sustainable development of future academia in Sweden

This November, the National Junior Faculty (NJF) held its first nationwide conference in a digital format. The aim was to identify barriers for young researchers early in their academic careers and to start conversations about possible solutions and improvements.

“Our starting point was to initiate a discussion among young researchers to address issues such as how the academic environment looks like at present, what we can expect in the future and which challenges we might meet on the way,” explains Sara Hägg, chair of the National Junior Faculty in 2018 and one of the organizers of the digital conference.

She also emphasized that the role of the NJF is to unite junior researchers across Sweden and give them a voice to address problematic issues together, a recurrent theme during the event.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, president of the European Research Council and first keynote speaker, very clearly pointed out the importance of supporting scientists early in their careers. According to him, young researchers need the support, structure and possibility to pursue curiosity-driven, self-initiated research. He worried that the planned cut of the European Horizon program budget could be a severe blow to fundamental research and he expressed his fear that politicians are steering the limited resources towards certain topics of interest, not in the least because of the current coronavirus pandemic.

“I would like to invite funding agencies and decision makers at national and EU-levels to join my battle to defend bottom-up curiosity-driven research and make sure that stable funding is available for this type of research. We have to create conditions that attract the very best researchers and make them thrive”, he pointed out.

Pam Freedman, president of the International Association of Universities, agreed that the conditions for young researchers are tough. She emphasized that young researchers need a supportive academic environment both at department and faculty level. She also encouraged young researchers to stand up for themselves and not accept poor conditions.

“There are rules to be followed, fight for your right”, she remarked, at the same time as advocating for a transparent recruitment system.

The second keynote was delivered by Michelle King, the Director of Inclusion at Netflix, and a writer, advocate, and leading global expert in organizational culture. She impressed upon the audience how creating a culture that enables and values difference and orients away from the lean-in philosophy where women are encouraged to fit into a man's world enables a successful and happy workplace.

“We all deserve the freedom to be ourselves at work and to be valued for this”, she emphasized.

An important factor is to recognize and acknowledge inequalities and barriers. A major barrier to inequality is the denial that problems even exist and according to her, academic culture might be even harder to change than corporate structures. One solution is to stand up for each other and call out unequal behavior.

Karin Åmossa, from SULF, also reminded the attendees of the power of the trade unions. One problem of the current academic environment is the prevalence of back-to-back fixed-term positions, which creates insecurity and stress. The union has also called for clear and predictable career pathways, leading to permanent positions and petitioned the government to give more direct funding to the universities allowing better budget planning and financing of academic staff.

Sweden’s first NJF Conference was supposed to be held in-person in May 2020 but it was postponed to virtual mode due to the COVID19 situation. More than 300 participants from different universities across Sweden registered and engaged virtually with all invited speakers at the main chat and breakout rooms. Mo Segad, the chair of the NJF conference and one of the organizers, described the current situation as serious.

“There is a need for a clear and effective communication channel with the next-generation researchers to sort out and solve all the challenges. I see the accomplishment and the great success of this conference as a hope for all early and mid-career researchers to have a positive lifelong career in academia”, he concludes.

The invited speakers and panelists of the NJF conference were:

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President of the European Research Council

Michelle King, a leading global expert in organizational culture, writer, advocate and director of inclusion

Maria Thuveson, Director of the Swedish Research Council (VR)

Tobias Krantz, Special investigator, Sweden’s National Research Infrastructure

Pam Fredman, President of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and STRUT-investigator

Lars Geschwind, Head of Learning Unit at KTH

Carine Signoret, Senior Lecturer at LiU

Riia Sustarsic, Project Coordinator at CHIP, Rigshospitalet Denmark

Juha Nieminen, Lecturer in Teaching and learning at KI

Karin Åmossa, SULF

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Facts about the National Junior Faculty Sweden:

The National Junior Faculty of Sweden is an umbrella organization for local junior/future/young faculties at Swedish Universities, currently Karolinska Institutet, Linköping University, Lund University, Uppsala University, Umeå University, Örebro University, Sahlgrenska Academy, Stockholm University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

The vision of NJF is to create the best possible academic environment that enables early career academics to achieve their full potential.

Find more information about National Junior Faculty, also about other activities here:
<https://nationaljf.se/>

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