

C O N F E R E N C E R E P O R T S

The 16th ASCOLA conference, a Panel on 'Career Challenges: How to make and maintain an academic career (not just as a woman)', virtual, 1–3 July 2021

It has been another difficult year affected by the pandemic outbreak. This meant that for the second time the ASCOLA (Academic Society for Competition Law) Annual Conference had to be held virtually. ASCOLA brings together numerous researchers and scholars from all continents with an interest in antitrust law, economics and policy. The 16th ASCOLA Conference, held virtually on 1–3 July 2021, led by the ASCOLA Executive Board, Michal Gal, Rupprecht Podszun and Peter Picht (plus their respective teams), had over 120 talks from inspiring speakers from all over the world. The main theme of the conference was Competition and Innovation in Digital Markets, with the focus on the application of competition laws (covering both developed and developing countries) in digital markets ensuring competition and/or innovation. Given that digital markets encompass platform-based business models, multi-sided markets, network effects and economies of scale and scope as well as other phenomena, they pose more complex competition issues. Therefore, the discussions also centred on the extent to which *ex-ante* regulatory tools should be introduced to promote competition in digital markets (namely the EU's current proposals for the Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act). Any competition law related matters will not be conclusive without the input of economists. Specifically, the keynote speech was presented by the economics Professor Carl Shapiro ('Antitrust: What went Wrong and How to Fix it'); moreover, an Economic expert Panel took place, consisting of two panellists – the renowned innovation economists Richard Gilbert (Berkeley) and Monika Schnitzer (Ludwig Maximilians University), the panel was moderated by Tommaso Valletti (Imperial College, London, and former chief economist of the EU Commission's DG Competition).

In contrast to the previous events, this conference also featured a panel on Career Challenges: How to make and maintain an academic career (not just as a woman). The panel was moderated by Rupprecht Podszun and Kati Cseres with panellists, Anna Gerbrandy, Juan David Gutiérrez, Jasminka Pecotić Kaufman, and Wendy Ng, sharing their stories and experiences. While following an informal format, this session (obviously, not recorded) created a platform for open, honest discussions with the audience. The panel focused on the current challenges in pursuing an academic career starting from a young/inexperienced scholar to an established academic. Some of the

recurring themes representing challenges encountered by academics (with additional obstacles that women face) are listed below, with further practical advice from the Panel. Given my nearly-20 years of academic work in the UK Higher Education, I also shared my experience.

It has been noted that there is tremendous pressure on academics worldwide to publish high quality research papers. This one-sided emphasis on research often undermines other essential areas of an academic role, such as education, impact, leadership¹ and collegiality. Intense teaching requirements, which are usually placed on early career researchers, prevent them from allocating time for research, therefore, averting them from climbing the promotion ladder. Therefore, it is essential to recalibrate and broaden promotion criteria. For instance, Brunel University London (BUL) has moved from bibliometric indicators, used in promotion evaluations, which evidently favoured science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) subjects, to four main criteria based on teaching, research, external impact and finally, leadership, management and collegiality. It is unrealistic for each academic to excel in each of these key areas; yet, they are expected to excel in three of these areas whilst being active in the fourth one. This change proved successful, as this led to more women being promoted. The panel also noted the role of gate-keepers, with a vicious cycle – established academics treat others the same way they were treated as juniors. Therefore, there is a need ‘to break the cycle by those moving to senior positions’.

The next discussion was on a work-life balance, where juggling teaching, research and administration means working long hours, leaving no room for a personal life. Some studies indicated that many academics suffer from the ‘imposter syndrome’, increasingly feeling under pressure to deliver excellence in teaching, research and administration, working in excess of 60 hours per week,² a situation that seriously affects their mental health and well-being. This has scaled up during the COVID-19 outbreak with the in-ability to switch-off from the work-mode while working from home (‘living at work’). The complexities of reconciling a career with childcare (or caring for elderly or both) pose additional challenges. Therefore, the panel suggested that at least one day per week is used to do something different (such as cycling or hiking) also ensuring the utilisation of holiday entitlements. There have also been suggestions to embrace teamwork – lean on support and learning from others is not a weakness; ‘[a]sking for help, sharing our knowledge, and looking for ways to develop as scholars are the things that will build a better career, and a better academic culture’.³

Inspiring leadership and development, mentorship, role models (ideally, more than one from different genders, career stages etc.) and support programmes are central in an academic career. For instance, the UK has made a valuable contribution to the

¹ Position-paper-Room-for-everyone’s-talent.pdf (vsnu.nl).

² Academic work-life balance: Can it be achieved – Equality and Diversity in Biosciences (nottingham.ac.uk).

³ Episode 82: What the Bros and Dudes Don’t Want You to Know About Academia – cathy mazak.

Aurora and Athena Swan initiatives directed at supporting women in their academic life progression, stimulating engagement in a greater career self-management activity. Aurora is the UK Advance HE (Higher Education)’s leadership development initiative for women – it is aimed at addressing the under-representation of women in leadership positions in the higher education sector.⁴ Whereas the Athena Swan Charter is a UK Advance HE framework which supports and transforms gender equality within higher education and research, where institutions and departments can apply for Athena Swan awards that recognise their gender equality efforts.⁵

Building on ASCOLA’s current culture to support early career researchers (namely, the *Best Junior Paper Award* at each annual conference; regular scholarship opportunities promotions at different institutions), ASCOLA is also planning to implement a mentoring programme in the future. The mentoring process enables scholars to move forward and develop more effectively, build confidence, new knowledge and insight to take control of their own development and work. This can be organised by the already active Chairs of ASCOLA’s regional chapters (the Chair of Central Europe (focus on Poland) is M. Bernatt; South East Europe (focus on Balkans) is J.P. Kaufman and A. Svetlicinii; and Eastern Europe (focus on Bulgaria) is V. Daskalova)⁶ that regularly hold talks and seminars to address issues affecting their regions. This mentoring programme could also tackle the problem of underrepresentation of scholars from the Central and Eastern European region by mentoring and growing a new generation of competition scholars.

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⁴ Aurora | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk).

⁵ Athena Swan Charter | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk).

⁶ Organisation – ASCOLA.