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To cite this article: Mustafa F. Özbilgin, Cihat Erbil, Semih Akçomak, Serdal Temel, Elif Karaosmanoğlu & Hülya Ünlü (02 Apr 2026): Hysteresis in the neoliberal academy: inside- and outside-track academic lives under authoritarian neoliberalism, *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2026.2649548](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2026.2649548)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2026.2649548>



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Published online: 02 Apr 2026.



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Hysteresis in the neoliberal academy: inside- and outside-track academic lives under authoritarian neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

Hysteresis in the neoliberal academy emerges as inherited academic dispositions collide with performance-driven governance under authoritarian neoliberalism, producing inside- and outside-track academic lives. We examine how neoliberal reforms in higher education in Turkey have restructured academic performance, generating uneven experiences for academics positioned within (inside-track) and against (outside-track) the dominant political orthodoxy. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, we show how the rapid transformation of institutional logics has produced temporal disjunctures between academic habitus and field conditions. Our qualitative analysis of responses from 2,023 Turkish academics reveals how inside-track academics tend to justify and benefit from the performative turn, while outside-track academics resist or are marginalised by it. This study makes an original contribution by revealing the embodied dynamics of field misalignment and offering a novel conceptualisation of insider/outsider positioning in academic careers under neoliberalism. We show how performance regimes govern voice as well as productivity, reproducing patterned orientations of orthodoxy and heterodoxy with implications for governance, leadership, and evaluation design in higher education.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 July 2025
Accepted 17 March 2026

KEYWORDS

Authoritarian neoliberalism; hysteresis; inside-track; orthodoxy and heterodoxy; outside-track; Turkey

Introduction

The higher education sector has undergone a profound neoliberal transformation, recasting universities as market-driven institutions governed by the logic of efficiency, competition, and financial return. Across national contexts, universities have adopted corporate managerial practices to maximise outputs through competitive funding, performance metrics, and knowledge commodification (Mikes and Power 2023; Mintz 2021). These shifts prioritise profitability and redefine academic worth through market logic and performance indicators that privilege revenue-generating outputs over social inquiry and public good (Eren 2025; Warren 2017).

Neoliberal reforms have also redefined academic labour through individualised performance regimes. Systems of ranking, evaluation, and reward now emphasise outputs such as publication

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rates, grant income, patenting, and student satisfaction (Macfarlane 2021; Temel 2023). In this context, collaboration becomes instrumentalised, and traditional values of service and intellectual curiosity are increasingly displaced by self-promotion and competition (Burton 2021). Early-career and precariously employed academics are particularly vulnerable to intensified workloads, job insecurity, and diminished autonomy (Bottrell and Keating 2019; Burton and Bowman 2022; Kidman and Chu 2017).

While these dynamics have been observed globally, their impact has been uneven. In contexts where neoliberal values remain unregulated, such as Turkey, their effects are more pronounced (Baykut et al. 2022). Turkey's higher education system has experienced rapid and extensive neoliberalisation, marked by commercialisation, individual performance metrics, and increased state control (Baykut et al. 2022; Doğan and Selenica 2022). These transformations, underpinned by political and economic centralisation, have reshaped academic work and career progression in ways that advantage those aligned with dominant ideologies while marginalising dissenting or heterodox voices (Aydin 2022; Unal 2025). While the mechanisms identified here are relevant to wider debates on neoliberalisation and academic subjectivity, the analysis is anchored in the Turkish higher education context, where authoritarian conditions intensify the governance of evaluation, voice, and institutional vulnerability, shaping the specific textures of hysteresis and resistance observed in the data. When we refer to authoritarian regimes allowing neoliberalism to become effectively unregulated, we do not suggest the absence of state control but the erosion of institutional safeguards, plural accountability, and protected voice, enabling performance rationalities to operate through discretionary and politically mediated governance.

To analyse this dual structuring of academic experience, we draw on Bourdieu's ([1997] 2000) concept of hysteresis, which captures the misalignment between established academic dispositions (*habitus*) and rapidly shifting institutional conditions (*field*). Hysteresis is particularly useful in making sense of how individuals adapt to, resist, or are misaligned with new performance systems under neoliberal governance. We also employ Bourdieu's ([1984] 1988) broader theory of field, capital, orthodoxy, heterodoxy and symbolic power to understand how academic careers are shaped by differential access to resources, legitimacy, and recognition. In this paper, the terms *inside-track* and *outside-track* are used as Bourdieusian analytical shorthand for orthodox and heterodox orientations within the academic field, and do not refer directly to tenure status, contract type, or conventional career trajectory distinctions used elsewhere in the higher education literature. In this Bourdieusian framing, the *inside track* reflects orthodoxy, understood as institutionally recognised knowledge and value, whilst the *outside track* reflects heterodoxy, understood as critique and alternative value claims that contest dominant evaluative logics within the field. Throughout the paper, *inside-* and *outside-track* are used as interpretive orientations in participants' narratives rather than as fixed groups of academics, and accounts that expressed mixed or shifting positioning were treated as analytically significant rather than forced into a rigid binary. The results section shows how these orientations crystallise inductively through participants' accounts of values, experience, and organising, including narratives that express ambivalence and movement across positions.

This paper explores how neoliberal reforms in Turkish higher education have produced divergent experiences that become visible through patterned differences in participants' narratives. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identified recurring orientations towards the restructured performance field, including accounts that reproduce dominant institutional and political logics as well as accounts that contest them. We describe these orientations as *inside-track* and *outside-track* positioning, drawing on Bourdieu's distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and we use them as emergent analytical heuristics rather than fixed academic types or a rigid binary. The results section shows how these orientations crystallise through participants' narratives of values, experience, and organising under neoliberal transformation.

We employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to examine narrative (qualitative) data from 2,023 academics in Turkey. Our study contributes to critical debates on how neoliberalism restructures the academic field and shapes the experiences of academics. We ask: How do academics experience and

respond to neoliberal transformations in academic performance systems, and how are these experiences shaped by their position within the academic field? By addressing this question, we theorise the embodied and institutional consequences of neoliberalism, illustrating how performance systems operate as technical tools and as political instruments that reconfigure inclusion, recognition, and the very meaning of academic success.

This study makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises hysteresis as a patterned condition of academic subjectivity under neoliberal-authoritarian restructuring, rather than as an individualised adjustment failure. Second, it shows how orthodoxy and heterodoxy are enacted as inside- and outside-track orientations that shape recognition, vulnerability, and voice within performance regimes. Third, it advances an institutional implication: evaluation becomes a mechanism for governing voice as well as performance, thereby reproducing or mitigating the inside/outside divide through everyday designs of recognition.

We first outline the theoretical framework underpinning our study, focusing on hysteresis, the field, habitus, capitals, and strategies of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. We then provide a contextual overview of the neoliberal transformation of Turkish higher education. After presenting our methodology and approach to inside-/outside-track classification, we offer our findings in three narrative pairings: values, experience, and organisation. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analysis for understanding academic subjectivity, inclusion, and resistance under neoliberalism, and conclude by reflecting on the future of performance systems in higher education.

Hysteresis, the field, habitus, capitals and strategies of orthodoxy and heterodoxy

The field concept in the Bourdieusian sense refers to a unique setting with its rules of the game, unique forms of capital, and embedded knowledge and symbolic relations. Academia presents one such field on which Bourdieu ([1984] 1988) has extensively theorised in his book *Homo Academicus*. Habitus in a field is the internalised and taken-for-granted assumptions and structures that individuals accept as the game's rules. Thus, habitus frames individual and collective agency in terms of what is practical and doable for the actors in a particular field. Individuals have four fundamental forms or resources, which Bourdieu frames as capitals: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The mobilisation of varied forms of capital through individual strategies shapes an individual's relative power and influence in a given field of relations.

Hysteresis is one of the less mobilised concepts of Pierre Bourdieu ([1997] 2000). It refers to the volatility caused by the disjuncture between changes in any field of relations (in our case, academic habitus in terms of performance expectations) and the way the players (academics in our case) respond to these changes, often with a lag in adaptation. Hysteresis encapsulates the latent inertia experienced when entrenched practices and convictions within a field grapple with the exigencies of rapid transformation, culminating in disequilibrium or misalignment. To understand uneven relations of power in setting the rules of the game and positions of varied players, we mobilise the notion of hegemony, a term that Gramsci ([1948] 2011) introduced to highlight the power of the elites in webs of social relations in shaping public opinion, understanding and practices in line with the interests of the elite. Hegemony goes beyond coercive mechanisms, integrating a consensus component through cultural and ideological pathways, allowing the values of the dominant class to become the accepted common sense within various social contexts. Neoliberalism presents a hegemonic system that serves the interests of social and economic elites in countries that do not regulate the impact of the market on social and political relations.

Bourdieu ([1977] 1995) introduced the notion of doxa, the legitimate ways of knowing, to elaborate how struggles between fields of relations to dominate sources, meanings and use of knowledge happen. For Bourdieu, orthodoxy is the established knowledge upheld by the inside-track. Heterodoxy is the legitimate, yet marginalised knowledge upheld by the outside-track marginalised by the dominant inside-track. A dialectical relationship shapes the relationship between orthodoxy

and heterodoxy, and inter- and intra-field struggles for power and control shape orthodoxy and heterodoxy's boundary conditions and porosity.

Such dialectical interplay between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, moulded by struggles for dominance within and across fields, resonates strongly in the context of higher education. Here, the dynamic tension between orthodox research practices and emerging yet often heterodox approaches reflects a continuous negotiation of power and control, shaping the landscape of academic knowledge and practice (De Vaujany et al. 2021; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2024).

Belonging and otherness in academia in the context of hysteresis: the emergence of the inside and outside-track

Changes in performance systems are neither innocuous nor impartial shifts. Performative pressures with performance system changes often reflect organisations' uneven power dynamics (Soin and Huber 2023). The citizen charter in the UK, as introduced by Margaret Thatcher, has aimed to connect the performance of public sector workers with pay. The introduction of performance management systems dates back to economic liberalisation in her times in the UK, concurrent with Ronald Reagan in the USA and Turgut Ozal in Turkey (Baykut et al. 2022). Managerialism and performance systems associated with it were introduced at that time and gradually became entrenched. This paper focuses on Turkey, where neoliberalism remains unregulated and traditionally exposes public sector organisations to market logic, performative pressures, individualisation and commercialisation (Küskü, Aracı, and Özbilgin 2021, 2022).

Universities in Turkey were public sector organisations until the formation of foundation universities in the 1980s. With the formation and exponent versities, especially in the 1990s, the sector was particularly exposed to the neoliberal turn (Önal 2012). With the expansion and commercialisation of university education in Turkey, central authorities introduced individual measures after 2010 as part of national research assessment efforts to measure individual academics' academic and research outcomes as proxies for institutional and team performance (Çakir, Kuyurtar, and Balyer 2024; Maral 2024). Turkish academic performance systems have transformed with British and US systems towards individual performance-based metrics and measures. These changes have inculcated several new values in the academic field, transforming the habitus of academics, shifting their slow, service-oriented, non-performative and discretionary collaborative ethos to a fast-moving, competitive, supposedly high-performance and financialised ethos (Aypay, Özdemir, and Ertem 2025; Karadag 2021). The political and economic rule since 2002 in Turkey has signified the neoliberal transformation of Turkish higher education (Doğan 2026). The era is characterised by the commercialisation of university education, reliance on individual performance-based incentives, and greater centralisation of performance indexes, reflecting a neoliberal approach. The internationalisation of higher education in Turkey aligned with the neoliberal turn and strengthened academia's economic and commercial rationales (Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci 2023). These fundamental changes emerged from the transformation of the field of academia, which created a rupture between the foundational values of the academic field and reinforced the new habitus of academic workers. This new habitus signified a paradigm shift in the perception and execution of academic work in the neoliberalisation of higher education.

The neoliberal turn had uneven impacts. Individuals closer to the dominant narratives of the state became significant actors in the neoliberal transformation of the sector and its performance management systems (Caliskan and Buyukgoze 2026; Erbil and Özbilgin 2024). Minoritised individuals, in terms of their relationship to the dominant narratives, are resigned to counter-narratives, accepting or resisting the neoliberal turn. While the outside-track members tried to uphold some values such as social commons, bias-free processes, eliminating systemic injustice, and demand for progress and change, inside-track members, benefiting from the current states of affairs, often remain reluctant to change the game, which serves them well and establishes the rule of inequality (Karakulak and Lawrence 2023). Such a dichotomy creates tension within the academic community. We use

hysteresis to analyse how inside- and outside-track academics adapt to or resist the restructured academic performance system, attending to how their habitus is aligned or misaligned with the neoliberal field.

Context: the national transformation of Turkish higher education

The neoliberal project in Turkey has unfolded through an intricate coupling of marketisation and state centralisation, producing a distinctive hybrid of authoritarian and neoliberal governance. Unlike Western contexts where market logic has been introduced alongside decentralisation and institutional autonomy, in Turkey, neoliberalisation has advanced through political centralisation. Beginning with the 1980 military coup, the establishment of the Higher Education Council (YÖK) in 1981 marked a decisive moment in subordinating universities to the state, consolidating control over appointments, curriculum, and resource allocation (Baykut et al. 2022).

From the early 2000s, successive governments intensified this agenda through policies that commercialised higher education, introduced performance-based incentives, and expanded private foundation universities, effectively transforming higher education from a public good into a competitive market. The 2010s saw further alignment with global audit cultures: performance indicators, international rankings, and publication-based incentives were institutionalised through YÖK and the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK). These reforms mirrored neoliberal trends elsewhere (e.g. in the UK and US) but acquired a distinctly politicised character in Turkey, where academic loyalty and ideological conformity increasingly shaped access to resources, promotions, and institutional leadership (Aydin 2022; Doğan and Selenica 2022). At the same time, these evaluative pressures are not uniformly institutionalised across Turkish higher education. While many state universities have intensified metric-oriented monitoring through incentives, administrative reporting, and workload expectations, student survey-based evaluation remains more variable and is more commonly formalised in some foundation universities (Maral 2024). We therefore interpret references to student feedback as reflecting local institutional arrangements and perceived evaluative cultures rather than a standardised national performance regime.

The 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency marked another watershed. Thousands of academics were dismissed or prosecuted under emergency decrees, severely constraining academic freedom and reinforcing political dependency as a condition of professional security (Buckner 2023; Özen and Körükmez 2022). The 2017 constitutional change allowing the president to directly appoint university rectors further centralised authority, eroding collegial governance and intensifying top-down control (Buckner 2023). Under these conditions, neoliberal reforms in Turkey have not simply incentivised productivity and competitiveness; they have also produced moral hierarchies of belonging and exclusion, rewarding those aligned with dominant political narratives (inside-track academics) while marginalising dissenting, heterodox, and critical scholars (outside-track academics).

This configuration situates Turkey's higher education system within what Doğan (2026) terms authoritarian neoliberalism, a regime in which the marketisation of knowledge production coexists with increasing state control over intellectual life. The resulting academic field is characterised by heightened competition, ideological surveillance, and precarious employment, conditions that amplify the hysteretic disjuncture between inherited academic values of autonomy and service, and the emerging performative logic of compliance and instrumentalism.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology. Our aim was to capture academics' lived experiences and meaning-making processes within the neoliberal transformation of higher education in Turkey. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study focuses on depth of understanding and analytical insight. We collected data via an anonymous

online study consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit narrative accounts of participants' professional trajectories, institutional contexts, and experiences of performance evaluation. As the majority of respondents were employed in state universities, we interpret reported practices of evaluation (including references to student survey feedback) as situated accounts that may reflect institutional variation across Turkish higher education rather than a consistently formalised national model. To avoid unintended generalisation, we distinguish between formally codified evaluation mechanisms and perceived evaluative pressures in interpreting participants' accounts. References to evaluation are therefore treated as situated experiences that may reflect formal procedures in some settings, while operating primarily through informal expectations, comparison, and reputational judgement in others.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was chosen to allow participants to express their viewpoints in their own words within the politically and ideologically divided Turkish higher education system. Braun and Clarke (2019) indicate that RTA facilitates an in-depth examination of academics' subjective experiences and narratives. In this context, academics may experience differentiated conditions of recognition and security depending on their proximity to dominant political orthodoxies. Our objective with this methodology is to examine how inside- and outside-track academics interpret and interact with the academically performance-oriented system influenced by neoliberal ideology, a system favouring competitive and commercialised metrics over traditional public service ethos and seniority principles. We also examine how performance evaluation is experienced across institutional settings, ranging from managerial monitoring and incentive regimes to contexts where formalised student feedback carries greater weight. The adaptable nature of RTA in coding and theme development, anchored in Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, allows for a detailed and nuanced analysis. We aim to elucidate how academics navigate and interpret the evolving academic environment. RTA allows us to document the participants' experiences and sheds light on the broader socio-cultural and political dynamics shaping academic practices and performances amidst the changing landscape of Turkey's higher education system.

Research design and data collection

In our study, we explore the experiences and perceptions of academics within the Turkish higher education system, characterised by significant political and ideological divisions. We strategically designed an online study in three main sections. The initial section addresses the career trajectories and professional challenges of academics, reflecting the influence of the prevailing political landscape. The second section critically examines how academics adapt their strategies to the changing dynamics of performance evaluation systems. The final section investigates the shifts in academic norms and the reactions of academic colleagues to these changes. To contextualise our analysis, we included demographic questions. Our comprehensive methodology illuminates the dual outcomes of contemporary academic policies, highlighting the diverse impacts on academics closely aligned with the political orthodoxy versus those with divergent, heterodox views, thereby offering valuable perspectives on the transformation of Turkish academic systems in contexts of neoliberalisation.

Our online study, consisting of 23 open-ended questions, was developed collaboratively with our field peers, whose insights we sought before dissemination. Following their feedback, we revised the questionnaire, which included three thematic groups: (1) academics' career trajectories and professional challenges, (2) their adaptive strategies in response to changing performance systems, and (3) shifting academic norms and collegial relations. In addition, a final section included demographic questions to contextualise participants' responses. After integrating peer feedback, we obtained ethical approval and then utilised a database of researchers' email addresses in Turkey, which the research team compiled using information available on universities' websites. The online study remained open for two months, during which we received input from academics across various institutions. All data were stored securely on a protected computer accessible only

to the research team, in strict adherence to our commitment to participant confidentiality. The online study provided rich qualitative data that captured academics' lived experiences and perspectives across diverse institutional and disciplinary contexts, forming the empirical foundation for our reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, given the politically sensitive context of Turkish academia, where fear of repercussions often discourages open participation, the anonymous nature of the online study proved essential in enabling individuals to express their experiences and opinions freely (Erbil 2025).

The study generated 2023 responses. Of the participants, 1190 are male, and 833 are female. A significant proportion are aged between 41 and 50. Regarding academic titles, there are 912 professors, 581 associate professors, 327 assistant professors, 140 research assistants, and 63 lecturers. Of the total, 1,880 are affiliated with public universities, while 133 are from private universities. The difference between the total numbers is due to non-response in some cases.

Inside-/outside-track classification

The distinction between inside- and outside-track academics was not predetermined but emerged inductively through iterative analysis as heuristic concepts. During the initial stages of reflexive thematic analysis, we observed recurring contrasts in participants' narratives regarding values, perceived fairness, and institutional belonging. These contrasts reflected two dominant orientations: one aligning with the institutional and political orthodoxy of the neoliberal academy (inside-track), and another expressing critical or marginalised perspectives (outside-track). Through multiple rounds of coding and collaborative discussion, these orientations stabilised into an interpretive framework. Hence, the inside/outside-track distinction should be viewed as a conceptual outcome of the analysis, not an evaluative criterion applied to the data. It captures relational positioning within the academic field rather than fixed personal or moral attributes. Consistent with Bourdieu's relational sociology, these positions are analytically relational and context-dependent, representing patterns of alignment and misalignment with institutional logics rather than dichotomous categories of worth.

A critical methodological innovation in our study was the development of a systematic classification framework to distinguish between inside-track and outside-track academics based on their responses. Given the politically sensitive context in Turkey (Lee 1993), we deliberately avoided direct questions about political alignment, as this could have compromised both response rates and the authenticity of participants' accounts. While the survey deliberately avoided direct or politically sensitive questions to ensure participants' safety and to encourage candid responses, we recognise that our analysis draws inferences about participants' political positioning. These inferences were not based on explicit declarations, but rather on discursive and contextual indicators embedded in participants' narratives, such as their attitudes towards performance systems, references to political events, and language reflecting alignment or dissent with dominant institutional norms. This interpretive process followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) principles of reflexive thematic analysis, where meaning is constructed through the interaction between the researcher's interpretation, theoretical framing, and participants' accounts. Thus, political alignment was treated as an analytical construct, not as a self-reported variable, derived through systematic coding grounded in Bourdieu's ([1997] 2000) notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

We developed our inside/outside-track classification through a multi-stage process, which is designed to ensure reliability and validity across our substantial dataset. In Stage 1, drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, we established theoretical foundations for identifying academics' positioning within the field (Barbato and Turri 2020). Inside-track academics were conceptualised as those whose responses indicated alignment with dominant political and institutional narratives, whilst outside-track academics demonstrated resistance to or marginalisation by these dominant structures.

In Stage 2, through an iterative process, we identified explicit and implicit markers of political and institutional positioning. Inside-track indicators included explicit endorsement of current

performance management systems, positive framing of competitive metrics and individualised achievement, language patterns consistent with institutional and governmental discourse, absence of criticism regarding systemic bias or political interference, and emphasis on merit-based advancement within existing structures. Conversely, outside-track indicators included direct criticism of performance management systems as biased or unjust, references to experiences of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or political views, explicit mention of political events (e.g. Peace Petition signatories, Boğaziçi University protests), emphasis on collective values, social commons, and public service ethos, and accounts of career obstacles linked to political or ideological positioning.

We acknowledge that academic identities and dispositions are rarely static or uniform. Academics may align with dominant institutional logics in some domains (for instance, publication productivity) while resisting or questioning them in others (such as governance or ethics). Our classification of inside-track and outside-track academics, therefore, does not imply fixed or mutually exclusive categories. Rather, it represents a heuristic distinction grounded in patterns of alignment and resistance that emerged across participants' narratives. These categories capture dominant tendencies in positioning within the neoliberal academic field, while allowing for internal variability and contradiction. As Bourdieu ([1997] 2000) reminds us, agents continually negotiate their position within the field, and their habitus adapts in response to shifting power relations. Hence, our framework recognises that academics may move between or inhabit hybrid positions along an inside–outside continuum, depending on institutional, temporal, and personal contexts.

While demographic information, including gender, age, institutional type, and academic title, was collected to contextualise responses, intersectional analysis was not the primary focus of this paper. These data informed our interpretation of diversity within inside- and outside-track groups, but were not used as categorical variables. We acknowledge that a fuller exploration of how intersecting identities shape academic trajectories would yield deeper insight into variations in agency and positioning.

Analysis

We use reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) on the narrative and textual responses. Our reflexive thematic analysis followed an iterative process in which prior theoretical knowledge, field data, researcher reflexivity, and analytical insights continuously informed one another (see [Figure 1](#)). Rather than a linear progression, we engaged in ongoing dialogical movement between our Bourdieusian theoretical framework and emerging empirical patterns, individual researcher reflections and collaborative analytical discussions, initial classifications and refined understanding of inside/outside-track positioning, and preliminary themes and a deeper interrogation of dual pathway dynamics. Each analytical iteration deepened our conceptual insights whilst maintaining grounding in participants' experiences, revealing how academics guide neoliberal transformation through their positioned encounters with institutional change.

According to Braun et al. (2023), collective qualitative analysis methodology requires collaborative input in the development of the coding list, the execution of the coding process, and the establishment of themes, with a particular emphasis on achieving consensus in areas of initial disparity. They recommend that such a collaborative approach bolsters the accuracy of RTA. By adopting a relational perspective (Syed and Özbilgin 2009), we connected individual academic experiences at the micro-level with broader organisational and national developments at the meso and macro levels. This strategy proved pivotal in revealing the intricate relationship between the personal experiences of academics and the extensive systemic transformations within the Turkish higher education system, resulting in a comprehensive analysis. Further delineating the inductive categorisation process, we determined inside-track and outside-track academics. To classify inside-track academics within our investigation, we examined data to detect explicit support for the dominant political ideologies, thereby situating these individuals squarely within the inside-track. Conversely, to identify outside-track academics, we scrutinised the evidence of engagement with heterodox

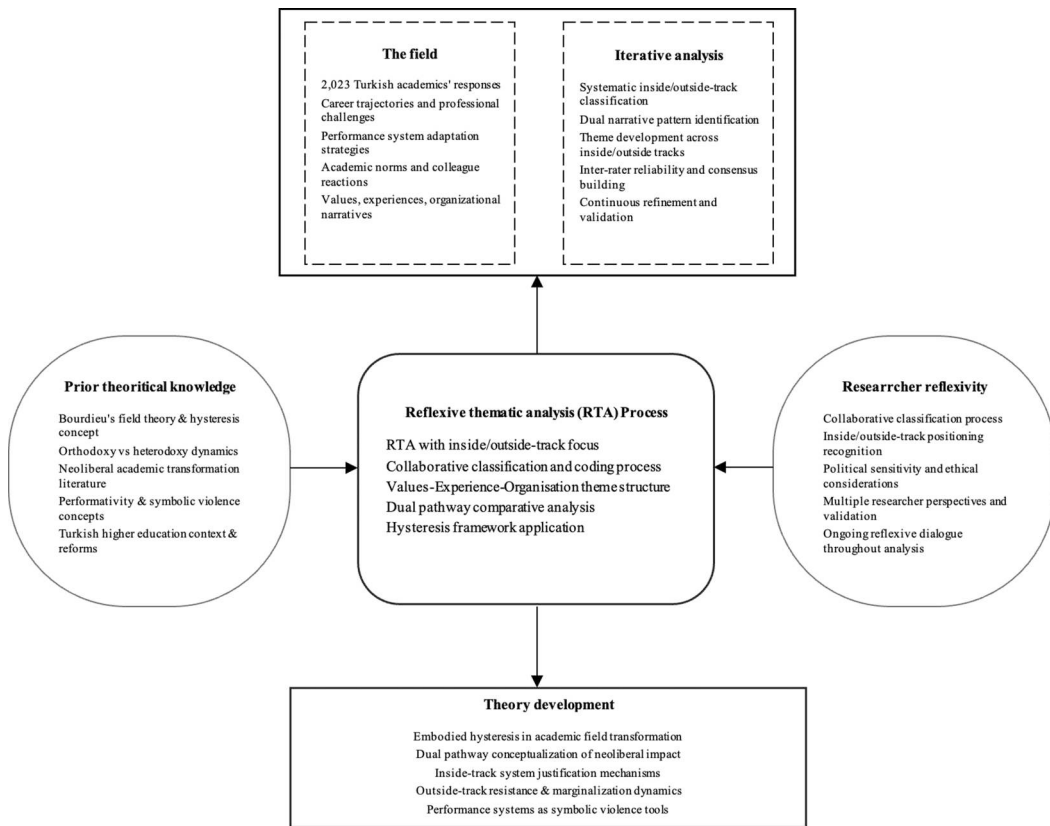


Figure 1. An iterative framework for reflexive thematic analysis.

expressions that contest the mainstream discourse. To improve analytic transparency, [Table 1](#) summarises how the authors moved from inductive coding of narrative responses to the identification of recurrent meaning-patterns that were subsequently interpreted through Bourdieu's distinction between orthodoxy (inside-track) and heterodoxy (outside-track). Coding was conducted in NVivo 15 to manage the large qualitative corpus and support iterative retrieval and comparison across responses. Importantly, the inside-/outside-track orientations were not produced through automated keyword detection or pre-programmed word lists, but emerged through interpretive coding and theme development across the dataset. These indicators were treated as interpretive signposts rather than deterministic markers, and narratives expressing ambivalence or mixed positioning were retained as analytically significant rather than forced into a rigid binary. [Table 1](#)

Table 1. Illustrative meaning patterns associated with inside-/outside-track orientations.

Orientation (heuristic)	Typical meaning-pattern	What it does in the field	Relation to orthodoxy/heterodoxy
Inside-track orientation	Normalising/optimising for metrics, strategic compliance, 'playing the game', pragmatic acceptance	Stabilises action under audit; reproduces dominant evaluative logic	Orthodox alignment
Outside-track orientation	Ethical critique, refusal/withdrawal, defence of academic purpose, solidarity, politicised commentary	Disrupts or questions the evaluative order; sustains alternative values	Heterodox contestation
Mixed/shifting orientation	Ambivalence, moral injury, double-speak, compliance-with-disgust, quiet resistance	Reveals misfit and instability under accelerated reform	Hysteresis condition (oscillation)

Table 2. Codes, subthemes, and themes.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
'title', 'benchmark', 'position', 'designation', 'careerism' 'responsibility', 'participation', 'public good', 'welfare', 'accountability'	Individualism Upholding social commons	Narratives of values
'criterion', 'metrics', 'ranking', 'competition', 'outcome-focus' 'gender-based biases', 'ethnicity', 'sexual orientation', 'emic biases', 'ageism', 'political intolerance, 'cultural stereotyping'	Performativity Against bias	Narratives of experience
'standards', 'hierarchies', 'status quo', 'legitimation', 'power dynamics' 'mobbing and harassment', 'career obstacles', 'resistance', 'dismissal of qualifications', 'advocacy for change'	System justification Against systemic injustice	Narratives of organising

provides a transferable heuristic for identifying orthodoxy/heterodoxy positioning in narrative accounts of academic work under performance regimes.

Importantly, the authors treat these orientations as situational and relational rather than as fixed academic types, recognising that many accounts displayed ambivalence, overlap, and shifting positioning under conditions of hysteresis. We identified three main themes that examine academics' values and organisational experiences on both inside- and outside-tracks. These themes, serving as mechanisms shaping academic narratives, reveal a spectrum of narrative articulations. We structured our approach to contrast the inside-track's dominant narratives with the outside-track's counter-narratives, aiming to illuminate the varied impacts of neoliberalism based on academics' positions within established power hierarchies. Table 2 provides a detailed representation of our study's data structure.

Findings

We examined the experiences of inside-track and outside-track academics regarding their values, experiences, and organisation. Across the corpus, approximately one-third of narratives predominantly expressed inside-track positioning and two-thirds of predominantly expressed outside-track positioning, with a substantial remainder showing mixed or shifting orientation; these counts are indicative rather than definitive, given the interpretive nature of positioning. We present these dominant and counter-narratives in pairings to expose the neoliberal turn that unevenly impacted academics of their proximity to hegemonic and normative power structures. To enhance clarity and provide an overview of the analytical structure, we begin by summarising the key themes and subthemes that emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis. Table 3 presents these themes, organised around three overarching narrative domains of values, experience, and organising, each comprising two subthemes that contrast the perspectives of inside- and outside-track academics. This structure guided the presentation of findings that follow, allowing us to trace how neoliberal performance systems are interpreted, enacted, and resisted across different academic positions. Before turning to the thematic presentation, we note that outside-track positioning tended to cluster in narratives shaped by heightened dependency and vulnerability, including accounts marked by employment precarity, constrained career progression, and uneven access

Table 3. Summary of themes and subthemes emerging from the reflexive thematic analysis.

Values	Individualism (inside-track)	Careerism, self-benchmarking, personal achievement, performative success
	Upholding social commons (outside-track)	Collegiality, public service ethos, critique of quantification
Experience	Performativity (inside-track)	Metrics, rankings, and symbolic violence through measurement
	Against bias (outside-track)	Gender, age, ethnicity, and political bias in performance evaluation
Organising	System justification (inside-track)	Endorsement of neoliberal reforms, alignment with institutional power
	Against systemic injustice (outside-track)	Resistance, withdrawal, legal appeals, alternative solidarities

to institutional protection. Across the corpus, these vulnerabilities were often intertwined with gendered expectations and age-graded career pressures, shaping both the costs of dissent and the capacity to sustain heterodox critique in the face of evaluative and political constraint. While the corpus shows clear patterning, many narratives expressed mixed or shifting positioning, and the authors therefore refrain from presenting inside-/outside-track as exhaustive categories with fixed membership. Instead, the heuristic is used to organise recurring orientations that cut across demographic and employment positions.

Narratives of values

We identified that the neoliberal turn reflected among inside-track academics as the expansion of individualism, a set of values inherent in performance management systems. In the Turkish context, a performance management system refers to institution-wide evaluative frameworks (e.g. incentive schemes, reporting requirements, and metric-oriented monitoring) rather than a remedial process aimed at managing individual underperformance. However, outside-track academics continued believing in social commons and the significance of the public service ethos of universities to serve the social good.

Individualism

The most remarkable impact of the neoliberal turn on value narratives has been individualising academic performance narratives (Grisard 2023). Monitoring, assessment and management of performance were conducted through individualised means. While Turkish state universities do not in practice rely solely on student satisfaction surveys for faculty evaluation, the participant's statement reflects a perception of performative pressure embedded in the metrics culture of the neoliberal academy. As studies show, recent reforms have increased the symbolic weight of student feedback in institutional performance audits and promotion procedures (Maral 2024; Toprak et al. 2021). Hence, the below narrative of one of our participants illustrates how individual academics experience a broader culture of quantification and visibility, where reputational and career outcomes are tied, at least symbolically, to student perceptions and numerical scores.

Performance evaluation in universities is often heavily influenced by student surveys. This can be a barrier to objective assessment for faculty members. Knowing that survey results could affect their performance, faculty members may feel pressured to grade leniently. The higher the grades a faculty member awards, the better their survey results tend to be. However, the main point I want to convey is that while student surveys are important, they shouldn't be the sole criterion for performance evaluation. Other factors such as publications, classroom performance, course updates, time devoted to teaching, and effective use of tools and resources should also be considered in these evaluations. (Female, 40-year-old, associate professor in a public university)

Even when inside-track scholars mentioned collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and engagement with other colleagues and the broader context, their career descriptions were focused on individual achievement, reflecting the focus on individualisation. This contrasts with the traditional academic model, which focuses on public service and common and social good ideals.

Collaboration with subject matter experts domestically and internationally is crucial, allowing one to benefit from their experience. Failures are opportunities for academics to improve themselves. For instance, at the beginning of my academic career and doctoral studies, I attended a course in the Netherlands which boosted my confidence. Post-doctorate, I spent time in the United States for research, which transformed my English proficiency and worldview. I met and collaborated with leading scientists in my field. I recognised the hierarchical status of academic titles in the university and embraced every opportunity to grow without being fixated on these titles. With each new academic achievement, whether becoming an associate professor or a full professor, I enthusiastically pursued new knowledge. (Male, 55-year-old, professor in a public university)

At first glance, this narrative signals openness and engagement, yet within the neoliberal academic context, it also exemplifies the individualisation of success. International collaboration here is framed

less as a collective pursuit of knowledge for the social good and more as a pathway to personal advancement and mobility. This framing aligns with neoliberal academic habitus, where self-improvement, competitiveness, and cosmopolitan distinction (Bourdieu [1984] 1988; Karakulak and Lawrence 2023) operate as moral imperatives of the entrepreneurial academic. Thus, what once represented collegial exchange now functions as an instrument of individual distinction and symbolic capital accumulation. The neoliberal turn has also brought about a considerable degree of libertarianism, the belief in self-made life projects and boundless individual choice, unhindered by structural constraints or social demands (Davies and Gane 2021). One participant states they are comfortable with the new performance system as they set their benchmarks.

I have set my academic performance standards. Since this benchmark is high, I haven't faced difficulties in progressing. In my application for associate professorship, I didn't rely on the standard criteria but used my own. (Male, 49-year-old, professor in a private university)

For inside-track academics, the new performance management system focused their attention on their academic outputs, entrenching a sense of individualism in a sector that operated with the public sector, social service, common good, and public good logic.

Upholding social commons

For outside-track academics, the changes in the performance management systems were not as pleasant as those presented by inside-track academics. Some outside-track academics highlighted their disappointment in the change of values. One participant outlined how the supposedly objective criteria introduced by the performance management system have unexpected and negative consequences. In particular, they question the technical focus of the performance management system, which does not meet other quality requirements of academic work. They note how the new system serves some individuals well, focusing on their careerist games rather than the common good in academia.

My peers often say I don't conform to the system but try to change it. Unquantifiable tasks are as crucial as quantifiable ones and potentially more impactful in improving universities, the country, and the world. Regrettably, Turkey's university system is based on quantifiable and contradictory criteria, which I will outline: 1) The significance of these isn't valued in publications. This policy undermines the production of quality theses and research. 2) International collaborations often result in multi-authored publications, which score lower in promotion and incentive criteria. This presents a significant contradiction. 3) Patents are highly scored, but academia's primary role should be knowledge creation and dissemination. High value should be given to publications cited in patents. 4) The role of corresponding author as a key indicator of independent research globally isn't recognised in the main author definition in promotion criteria. 6) Stepping out of our comfort zone to visit peers in other countries or attend conferences outside our field can be enriching. (Female, 59-year-old, professor in a public university)

Some outside-track academics were vocal in critiquing individualism in the performance management system. They noted that this conflicts with the public good ethos of university employment. However, they are also aware that the current design of the performance management system downplays the public good and focuses on individual career outcomes.

In universities, academic performance is primarily evaluated based on publication criteria. Academics meeting only these publication requirements can advance their careers quickly. However, those who invest more in teaching, journal editing, or administrative roles don't find their efforts significantly recognised in academic performance. Academic activities benefiting the public good should also be included in evaluations alongside their career-focused efforts. (Male, 32-year-old, assistant professor in a private university)

When we explored the impact of the neoliberal turn in values, the inside-track was pleased with how careerist and individualist values informed the design of performance and career systems in academia. However, outside-track academics report that the sector's transformation has led to the corrosion of public goods and public sector culture. Lacking the proximity to power and resources of inside-track academics, outside-track academics sometimes remained silent or raised their voices

and resisted the avalanche of changes they viewed as a denigration of their profession. Rather than implying formal seniority or universal advantage, we use the term, proximity to power and resources, here to refer to differential access to institutional legitimacy, recognition, and navigational capacity within prevailing performance logics, which can be unevenly distributed across career stages.

Age emerged as a subtle but meaningful factor in shaping how academics positioned themselves within the neoliberal field. Older participants who entered academia before the institutionalisation of performance metrics often expressed dissonance and nostalgia for collegiality, service, and slow scholarship. Their narratives reflected a form of temporal dislocation, characteristic of hysteresis, as they struggled to reconcile earlier academic norms with the contemporary emphasis on visibility and quantification. In contrast, younger and early-career academics, many of whom had only experienced academic life within the performative regime, tended to normalise competitiveness, self-benchmarking, and mobility as legitimate pathways to success. For these academics, neoliberal norms were not experienced as an external imposition but as naturalised conditions of professional life. This generational contrast illustrates how hysteresis manifests differently across age cohorts: while older academics experience it as lag and loss, younger academics embody its reproduction through internalised performativity.

Narratives of experience

When participants reported on their experiences of the performance management system, we identified a notable difference between inside and outside-track academics. Inside-track academics supported the new performance management system, accepting its rationale, values and impact as natural. They have often supported the performative power of the performance management system.

Performativity

Performativity of a performance management system could be defined as game playing without reflecting on values and aims and impacts on social, economic, environmental, or political systems, institutions and contexts (Spicer, Alvesson, and Kärreman 2016). Inside-track positioning may be more readily recognised and rewarded under metricised evaluation regimes because it fits the dominant criteria of academic worth. However, such alignment does not guarantee security or advancement, particularly for early-career academics, for whom performative compliance often operates as a strategy of survival and institutional legibility rather than an assured pathway to benefit (Harding, Ford, and Lee 2017). Performative systems introduce competition as a ranking strategy, creating a small group of winners and a large group of losers (Vatansever and Gezici Yalçın 2015). While neoliberal performance systems intensify job insecurity, they also contribute to perceptions of work as meaningless or useless, a phenomenon often linked to poor management practices and toxic workplace cultures that alienate workers from their professional purpose (Soffia, Wood, and Burchell 2022).

For inside-track academics, the focus is increasingly on the quantitative dimensions of academic publications and metrics tied to measurable criteria, overshadowing these works' qualitative essence and societal impacts. Academic performance for inside-track academics has evolved into a strategic pursuit bereft of intrinsic values, goals, and dedication to influencing ethical frameworks within an academic context. Moreover, these academics instrumentalise human values to legitimise their competitive and performative efforts. An excerpt from one of our participants elucidates how objectivity and fairness have been appropriated as mechanisms to vindicate the performative disregard of the quality of academic publications.

Objectivity should be paramount in academic evaluations. Raising the standard and recognising those who truly deserve it is essential. Success should not be measured merely based on the last year's performance but on

consistent, long-term achievement. Performance over the years should be summarised with graphics, emphasising original, impactful publications. The candidate's identity, as well as the jury's, should be kept anonymous and evaluated by a separate jury to ensure fairness. Jurors who act unjustly should face consequences. (Female, 54-year-old, professor in a public university)

In their quest for performativity, inside-track academics frequently prioritise and legitimise competitive metrics such as citation counts and h-indexes as the primary benchmarks of academic excellence. Such a tendency often leads to symbolic violence within academia, where a scholar's work's inherent value and broader contributions are overshadowed or neglected in favour of more quantifiable measures. According to Bourdieu (1984), symbolic violence refers to the subtle and often unconscious ways in which established power structures and cultural norms perpetuate inequalities. Performativity becomes an agent of symbolic violence by reinforcing these abusive and repressive structures and norms, thereby memorialising a system that privileges quantifiable achievements over comprehensive scholarly merit and diversity. The quotation below exemplifies such an issue, where, despite a high ranking in objective metrics, the lack of recognition from their institution indicates a performative stance that insufficiently recognises the depth and influence of their academic endeavours.

In a study identifying 6000 academics in Turkey ranked by citation count and h-index, despite being second in my institution and, I believe, among the top 60 in the university, neither my department nor the university recognised or awarded my achievements. The university merely published the names on its website; even my faculty didn't announce it. This oversight was truly disheartening. Such situations highlight the need for a more transparent and rewarding academic evaluation system that truly acknowledges and values the contributions of its members. (Male, 30-year-old, research assistant in a public university)

Performativity of the academic performance systems leads to the valorisation of inside-track academics at the expense of outside-track, heterodox academics whose contributions are sidelined, misrecognised and denigrated. Inside-track academics turn the symbolic markers of the new performance system, such as citation, journal rankings and number of papers, into mantras of the profession, ignoring other aspects of academic work and failing to recognise interdisciplinary differences in publishing and citation results. Ranking of academics only serves a few academics positioned in fields of science that traditionally have high citation scores, or academics who limit their contributions to publishing alone.

Against bias

The outside-track was paved with demographic, social and political distance to the dominant inside-track academy. For example, some academics mentioned that their gender (women), ethnicity (minority), age (too young or too old), and political ideology (in opposition) led to some experiences of bias in their encounters with the performance management system. One scholar explained how the decline of democratic and meritocratic conventions led to the emergence of different forms of bias.

The dominance of male academics in all decision-making positions, along with male faculty members from different fields occupying roles without taking on teaching responsibilities and thereby dominating departmental operations, significantly impacts academic performance. The lack of respect for democratic conventions in the decision-making and negotiation stages of university management, and the absence of opportunities for female faculty members to meet with higher (male) authorities, are other critical issues that affect academic performance and the overall functioning of academic institutions. (Female, 48-year-old, associate professor in a private university)

Another participant explained how the performance management system does not shield outside-track candidates if viewed as political opponents.

I completed my PhD 7 years ago and started working as a research assistant doctor. I obtained my associate professorship 3.5 years ago but still work as a research assistant. It has been insinuated that my position was not granted due to differences in political opinion. My motivation to contribute to the university is nonexistent, and I am not making any effort. I only participate in projects and publications of my choosing. I don't believe

scientific progress can coexist with such a lack of meritocracy and partisan attitudes. (Female, 38-year-old, assistant professor in a public university)

Overall, the experience of the academic performance system for inside and outside-track candidates was markedly different. Inside-track academics appreciated the performative power of the performance system, valorising their qualities and creating a sense of competition across the sector, leading to winners and losers. However, the outside-track candidates remained norm-critical. They argued that gender, ethnicity and other forms of emic bias became entrenched with the neoliberal turn in the performance system, which is designed to serve the interests of the dominant inside-track.

Narratives of organising

We identified that inside and outside-track academics have chosen to organise differently. For inside-track academics, the organisation was straightforward. They chose the system justification route, upholding the system that favours their ways of work, welcoming changes as progress. However, outside-track academics have started organising to combat the introduction of what they see as systemic biases in the new performance system. So the polarisation of academic organisation was evident around system justification and combating systemic bias motives.

Despite the evident inequities of the performance system, many outside-track academics continue to work within institutions that marginalise them. Their persistence reflects not passivity but a form of bounded agency, a strategic negotiation of survival under constrained conditions (Erbil 2025; Kidman and Chu 2017). Several participants described how they sought small, everyday ways to maintain professional integrity: mentoring students, building informal peer networks, engaging in community projects, or quietly refusing to participate in performative exercises such as inflated publication reporting. These acts of micro-resistance illustrate how outside-track academics resist total assimilation while preserving their moral and scholarly commitments. Yet, as many participants noted, such resistance carries penalties, ranging from stalled promotion to social isolation, creating a paradox of endurance in which remaining within the system becomes both a form of protest and a means of protecting what remains of the academic vocation.

System justification

Inside-track academics are inclined to maintain the existing academic paradigm, which predominantly rewards performance through established metrics like publication counts, citations, and grant acquisitions. Their research and publication strategies, often aligned with these metrics, inadvertently or intentionally bolster standards that elevate quantifiable success above diverse scholarly contributions. This perpetuation of systematic inequalities in academia frequently marginalises varied research topics, methodologies, and contributions that do not conform to these narrowly defined metrics. There are significant disciplinary variations, disallowing cross-disciplinary comparisons. Furthermore, these academics tend to eschew efforts to highlight systemic inequalities or critically assess the metrics reinforcing these disparities. Their endeavours are more commonly focused on endorsing the prevailing system, either by achieving high metrics themselves or by advocating for the continued reliance on these metrics in academic evaluations and promotions. Such conduct preserves their eminent positions within the academic hierarchy and does little to address or amend the foundational issues fostering inequality and bias in academic assessment and acknowledgement. One of our participants' statements serves as a poignant slogan, symbolising the approach of inside-track academics in Turkey.

Academic performance has a guiding impact on academic research and publication activities. (Female, 53-year-old, professor in a public university)

The participant's assessment of the contemporary academic landscape suggests a discernible erosion in its integrity and stringency. The current trend, where acquiring associate professorships

appears less demanding, and individuals with minimal scientific contributions are often included in publications, indicates a shift towards a more superficial evaluative framework. Inside-track academics sometimes rationalise this perceived degradation as a departure from a previous, ostensibly more robust system. However, while pinpointing the flaws in contemporary practices, this retrospective veneration may inadvertently neglect the pressing need for comprehensive, progressive reforms. The fixation on the rigour of the past system potentially acts as a pretext for disengaging from the fundamental systemic issues eroding the quality and integrity of academic procedures, thereby impeding substantial transformation in academia.

In 2008, I applied for an associate professorship position. Five professors reviewed my publications and found me qualified. Then they invited me for an oral exam. During the oral exam, one jury member said, 'the performance you show in the oral exam is important. I will assess how much you have contributed to your submitted publications. I will decide whether you qualify.' [...] It's evident that the integrity and rigour of the process have diminished. (Male, 51-year-old, professor in a public university)

Inside-track academics in Turkey tend to uphold the existing academic system, favouring established metrics like publication counts and citations, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities and marginalising diverse research. Their approach cements their positions within the academic hierarchy and overlooks the necessity for critically reassessing these metrics to facilitate meaningful reform. Reflecting on the shift towards a superficial evaluative framework in academia, these academics justify the current trends as deviating from a previously rigorous system, neglecting to address the deeper systemic issues compromising academic integrity and quality.

Against systemic injustice

The outside-track academics struggled with the systemic injustice introduced by the performance system. One scholar explains how the new performance system introduced a culture that undervalued international careers, scholarly and engaged work. Some academics have accepted this transformation towards systemic injustice with disdain, and others have chosen to show degrees of resistance.

After completing my postdoctoral studies in two countries abroad, I returned to Turkey in 2012. On my return, the associate professors and professors at my university greeted me with comments like 'You travelled and came back.' [...]. Since 2012, I haven't been able to prepare my associate professorship file, burdened with teaching 40 hours a week for years. (Female, 34-year-old, research assistant in a public university)

One outside-track scholar elaborates on how systemic injustice manifested in their career and how they had to struggle and resist systemic injustice through the legal system in Turkey.

Colleagues are using legal procedures with malicious intent to delay the careers of their academic counterparts. This unethical behaviour interfered with my applications for Associate Professorship, leading to my rejection twice despite meeting the requirements, as per the majority decision of the jury. I faced mobbing from some colleagues within the department. Additionally, I received reports from colleagues at different universities about negative remarks against me in my absence at national academic forums. Consequently, I lost both my motivation and faith in the scientific potential of our department. (Female, 44-year-old, associate professor in a public university)

Organising in support of the transformation of the performance system was relatively easy for inside-track academics because the political hegemony in the country introduced these changes, and they served the inside-track well. However, organising against the performance management system introduced through the neoliberal turn has not been accessible for outside-track academics. They experienced setbacks, backlash and challenges. Some outside-track academics resigned to their lowly shares in the game, others migrated to destinations where their work is valued, and others used the legal system to combat systemic biases and injustice, without union power.

Across the narratives, we observed moments of incipient resistance that illustrate the latent struggle for meaning between heterodox and orthodox positions. Some outside-track academics

described acts of refusal, declining to inflate publication records, resisting participation in competitive grant races, or prioritising mentoring and collective initiatives that were undervalued by institutional metrics. These practices rarely amounted to organised protest; rather, they embodied a slow, accumulative contestation of what counts as legitimate academic labour. At the same time, a small number of inside-track academics expressed discomfort with the performative logic they publicly endorsed, revealing the contradictions and moral ambivalence inherent in sustaining neoliberal norms. These accounts reveal a quiet but persistent friction through which academics negotiate the boundaries of legitimacy and meaning in their daily practices. We interpret these liminal narratives as analytically central rather than anomalous, as they foreground the unstable fit between dispositions and institutional demands that characterises hysteresis in a rapidly transforming field.

Discussion

Our analysis of over two thousand academics' narratives reveals how neoliberal restructuring in Turkish higher education has reconfigured academic values, experiences, and modes of organisation. Using Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, we interpret these changes as the result of a temporal and moral misalignment between established academic dispositions and newly imposed performance logics. This disjuncture has produced two dominant, though fluid, positionalities within the academic field: inside-track academics who adapt to and benefit from neoliberal regimes of performance, and outside-track academics who experience marginalisation or resist the performative turn. These orientations should therefore be read as patterned responses to institutional reward structures rather than proxies for rank, competence, or career success. Although many of the pressures described in the narratives include metric intensification, performative evaluation, and precarious academic labour, these are familiar across contemporary higher education systems; the Turkish context shapes how these dynamics are experienced and interpreted. In a centrally governed and politically constrained system, neoliberal performance logics intersect with heightened risks attached to voice, critique, and affiliation, intensifying the costs of heterodox positioning and amplifying the emotional and professional consequences of misrecognition (Erbil 2025). Read in this way, the inside-/outside-track orientations documented here reflect not only generic responses to managerialism but also context-specific negotiations of academic subjectivity under neoliberal-authoritarian governance.

The study contributes to extending Bourdieu's ([1997] 2000) concept of hysteresis beyond its conventional treatment as a static lag between habitus and field. Our findings show hysteresis to be a dynamic, stratified, and politically mediated process, where adaptation and resistance occur simultaneously within the same institutional environment. Rather than viewing hysteresis merely as misalignment, we conceptualise it as a field condition through which power and recognition are negotiated. The study, therefore, advances a relational understanding of academic subjectivity under neoliberalism, showing how the same institutional logics that enable mobility for some also produce symbolic exclusion for others. This contributes to ongoing debates about performativity in higher education (Jones et al. 2020; Macfarlane 2021; Soin and Huber 2023) by demonstrating that conformity to neoliberal norms is not simply instrumental but also affective and embodied.

Empirically, the paper provides one of the most comprehensive qualitative examinations of Turkish higher education under neoliberal transformation. It reveals how inside- and outside-track academics are not homogeneous groups but positions on a continuum of adaptation and resistance. The narratives illuminate how individualism, bias, performativity, and system justification interact as mechanisms through which neoliberalism is normalised within academic life. In contrast, the counter-narratives of outside-track academics expose the costs of exclusion, erosion of social commons, moral injury, and loss of trust in institutional fairness. To visualise these dynamics, we present below Table 4, which summarises the conceptual framework of inside- and outside-track experiences under neoliberal restructuring.

Table 4. Experiences of neoliberal academy among inside and outside-track academics.

	Narratives of values	Narratives of organising	Narratives of experience
Inside-track	Individualism	System justification	Performativity
Outside-track	Upholding social commons	Against systemic injustice	Against bias

The analysis also highlights a generational dimension to hysteresis. The disjuncture between habitus and field conditions is not uniformly distributed but mediated by academics' biographical timing within the neoliberal transformation of higher education. Those socialised in pre-neoliberal or early reform periods often retain dispositions anchored in public service and collegiality, whereas younger academics, emerging within an already neoliberalised academy, develop habitus attuned to performativity and competition. This finding extends existing theorisation of hysteresis by revealing its temporal stratification: habitus lags, and adaptations are patterned by historical entry points into the field. Understanding these generational dynamics provides a more granular account of how neoliberalism is reproduced, resisted, and naturalised across academic cohorts.

The endurance of outside-track academics within devaluing institutions invites reflection on the ambivalent nature of academic agency under neoliberalism. Our findings suggest that resistance does not always manifest as overt dissent or exit but often as subtle, embodied, and relational practices of quiet defiance (Erbil 2025; Harding, Ford, and Lee 2017; Röell, Özbilgin, and Arndt 2024). These include mentoring, maintaining collegial ties, and preserving scholarly integrity despite institutional disregard. Such micro-acts constitute what Scott (1985) calls everyday forms of resistance, and, in Bourdieusian terms, they represent attempts to reclaim autonomy within a dominated field. This extends the literature on hysteresis by showing that misalignment can generate frustration and also moral and affective labour aimed at sustaining alternative values. Understanding these forms of endurance and constrained resistance enriches debates about academic agency, precarity, and the possibilities of change within neoliberal institutions (Burton and Bowman 2022; Sojin and Huber 2023).

These glimpses of dissent and ambivalence illustrate that the relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is not merely structural but continuously renegotiated through micro-practices of resistance. The interplay between dominant and marginalised academic orientations constitutes what Bourdieu ([1997] 2000) would describe as a field of struggles, where meanings of excellence, value, and legitimacy are perpetually contested. In our data, this struggle manifests less as overt opposition and more as symbolic and moral resistance, expressed through the preservation of heterodox dispositions within an increasingly commodified field. The delayed or subdued nature of these struggles reflects hysteresis as a lagged form of resistance: a slow, embodied insistence on alternative values that resurface despite institutional pressures towards conformity. This perspective extends the application of hysteresis by demonstrating that inertia and resistance are intertwined; the lag is not only a symptom of dislocation but also a reservoir of potential transformation within the neoliberal academy.

Recognising hysteresis as a field condition also shifts the analytic focus from individual adaptation to institutional responsibility in conditions of crisis and extreme events (Özbilgin and Erbil 2025; Tekeste and Özbilgin 2026). For university governance and leadership, the findings suggest that performance regimes can inadvertently privilege orthodox forms of academic worth, rewarding metric alignment while marginalising heterodox scholarly labour, critique, and public purpose. Institutions may therefore reproduce the inside-/outside divide through explicit political pressures and everyday evaluative designs that narrow recognition, intensify symbolic competition, and amplify precarity. A key implication is the need for multi-dimensional assessment frameworks that value collegiality, academic citizenship, teaching and mentoring, and socially engaged scholarship alongside measurable outputs, whilst limiting punitive and exclusionary uses of metrics (Smith and Walker 2024). We refer to this dynamic as evaluative governance of voice, where performance systems operate as infrastructures of recognition and silence rather than neutral tools of measurement.

Rather than treating these divergences as individual dispositions, the paper shows how neoliberal restructuring produces patterned misalignment between academic habitus and institutional demands, generating stratified subjectivities and uneven capacities for voice. The central contribution is to demonstrate how hysteresis becomes governable through performance regimes, and how orthodoxy and heterodoxy are differentially recognised, rewarded, or marginalised in the contemporary academy. This redirects attention from personal resilience to institutional responsibility for designing recognition and evaluation systems that do not reproduce symbolic exclusion as a condition of academic survival.

The narratives presented here resonate beyond the Turkish context. Although grounded in national specificities, the findings mirror wider tensions within neoliberal universities globally, between institutional demands for performance and the academic desire for autonomy, recognition, and purpose. By linking these experiences to Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, this study provides a transferable framework for understanding how academic identities are reconstituted under neoliberal governance. While the mechanisms identified here travel across higher education systems, their consequences intensify under politically centralised governance, where the costs of critique are heightened.

Conclusions

Our study shows how hysteresis illuminates the lived disjunctures between institutional expectations and academic identities, offering insight into the learning processes, resistances, and adaptations that occur under conditions of institutional disruption. This has implications for understanding academic subjectivity, performativity, and the politics of inclusion in contemporary knowledge institutions.

The great transformation (Polanyi [1948] 2018) of the Turkish academic system through the marketisation of everything and neoliberalism peaked with the introduction and transformation of a performance system that entrenched individualism, fostered performativity and enforced system justification. We identified that these changes were warmly welcomed only by inside-track academics whose interests align with the power elite in the higher education system and the country. However, outside-track academics often subscribed to contrasting values such as social commons and had to fight against bias and systemic injustice in the new performance system.

Our findings reveal that resistance among outside-track academics often takes the form of subtle, relational endurance rather than open defiance. These quiet practices of moral agency through mentorship, collegial care, and principled refusal illustrate the everyday politics of survival in the neoliberal academy.

The uneven impact of the same performance system on inside and outside-track academics is concerning. Research on orthodoxy (inside-track) and heterodoxy (outside-track) suggests that healthy organisations and sectors allow for interfield inclusion rather than interfield struggles and competition that leads to the denigration of the outside-track. Heterodox academics from atypical socio-economic and political perspectives are innovators from the margins (Samdanis and Özbilgin 2020). We found that outside-track academics continued to uphold social commons, fighting against bias and systemic injustice. However, their organisation and possibilities of agency were seriously curbed by the sheer force of the dominant political will behind the commercialisation of higher education. Mavin et al. (2024) similarly underscore how neoliberal performative academic settings often suppress dissenting voices and fragment resistance, weakening the potential for collective transformation. We argue that hysteresis captures a widening rupture between tradition and change in the academic field. The marketisation of higher education has created momentum for those on the inside-track, enabling career advancement within performative systems of value. Yet, as Karakulak and Lawrence (2023) remind us, social problems are never neutral; they are negotiated between insiders who safeguard the status quo and outsiders who seek transformation. The supposed progress of neoliberal reform is thus haunted by the lived disillusionment of outside-track academics

who witness the erosion of social commons, fairness, and trust. Whether the global academy will listen to these voices remains uncertain. Recognition of their concerns could reorient performance systems towards broader forms of impact and inclusion. Encouragingly, resistance is emerging elsewhere, in places like the French and Australian academies (Brabet, Özbilgin, and Yamak 2021; Özbilgin 2009), where universities refuse to comply with ranking regimes. Yet, as Mor Barak et al. (2024) caution, without intentional disruption, the hierarchies of recognition continue to reproduce themselves, and our study shows how such cycles of exclusion are amplified by the performative turn.

In conclusion, this paper illuminates how hysteresis captures the embodied struggles of academics navigating the neoliberal university. Inside-track academics align with performative regimes that reward conformity, while outside-track academics embody resistance and ethical critique. Yet both experience the temporal disjunctures and moral ambivalence that define neoliberal higher education. By reconceptualising hysteresis as a relational and dynamic process, our study advances critical understandings of academic subjectivity and offers a lens for rethinking recognition, equity, and belonging in global academia. The study suggests that the lag effect at the heart of hysteresis may also function as a site of resistance: delayed adaptation can harbour the seeds of critique, enabling academics to sustain alternative meanings of scholarship and social purpose even under neoliberal constraint.

At the same time, these positional differences are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, age, institutional type, and disciplinary location. The large-scale nature of our dataset revealed traces of these intersectional effects, for instance, the ways in which women and early-career academics reported heightened precarity and symbolic exclusion, or how political dissent intersected with regional and institutional hierarchies. While a detailed intersectional analysis was not within the scope of this study, the patterns observed point to the need for a more differentiated and agentic understanding of academic life-worlds under neoliberalism. Future research could build on this framework to explore how overlapping social locations mediate experiences of recognition, resistance, and adaptation within the academic field.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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