

Stepping Into the Future of Project Studies

Establishing the PMJ College for Early Career Researchers in Project Studies

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Abstract

With the support of the Project Management Institute (PMI), we are excited to launch the PMJ College, a global, cross-journal initiative to nurture future leading academics in project studies. The initiative is important now, as academia struggles to attract and retain talent, yet really needs academics. Society requires good projects and project management to survive and hence also a vibrant academic project ecology to extend knowledge and help project practice. The PMJ College aims to attract, retain, and help early career academics through a series of workshops and mentorship, fostering passionate and engaged scholarship. Applications are open, and its process is described in this editorial.

Introduction

Projects serve as vehicles for materializing new futures, requiring both the audacity to dream and the proficiency to execute. While we have been researching projects and project-related organizing for decades in various industries and sectors, it is now important to turn our gaze inward, toward our own scholarly project ecology (Grabher, 2004)—to universities and business schools—and enact brighter futures.

Universities and business schools face formidable challenges, including the struggle to demonstrate relevance to society and the shrinking resources, aggravated by intensified global competition, an erosion of status and legitimacy, and a paradigm shift in knowledge production, exemplified by emergent technologies like generative AI (GenAI).

The usual value proposition of being an academic is severely impaired. Job security is weakening, our academic freedom is under pressure and the workload is substantial, with more teaching adding to the increasing pressure to publish or perish. Adding to this, we have an increasing expectation to secure large research grants, which are so competitive that the success rate of a grant application can be as low as 5% to 10%. On top of this already demanding job, we are also now expected to deliver societal *impact*, with limited guidance or support on what impact is and how to achieve it while maintaining academic excellence.

Not surprisingly, it is increasingly hard to attract and retain talent. To a greater extent, we observe that it is increasingly difficult to attract talented doctoral students, and convince them to pursue and stay in an academic career. With stressful working conditions and very low salaries (or bursaries) the best graduates, in particular from business schools, tend to opt for a career in higher-paying jobs like consultancy. Accordingly,

we risk becoming a “second choice,” attracting less talented people and slowly eroding excellence in research and teaching. We also observe the commoditization of the PhD education, dumbing it down into smaller chunks, teaching students to manufacture research and grant PhD degrees or DBAs for a sizeable fee (or, to put it more blankly: “Buy a PhD”).

Despite the deteriorating conditions, university scholarship has never been as relevant. It is through higher education that change can be facilitated. It is through strong, inclusive, and excellent research that we can make a difference, that we can discuss what is right and what is wrong, and what is good and what is bad. It is through strong scholarship that we can help guide society and individuals to shape a better future, enhance best practices, and develop new concepts and new perspectives to make us see better ways forward and help us imagine and work toward a better society.

Our job is essential, and the job in project studies is one of the most important ones. The reasons for this are not only that the grand challenges of society need to be addressed through various sorts of project-related initiatives—there is also a need for a project-oriented agency (Lenfle & Söderlund, 2022) to enable transition and change.

Frankly, society needs good projects to survive and great project management to make those projects happen (Geels

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et al., 2023) and it needs project leaders to take on the challenge. In fact, we need more braver and stronger project professionals, including project managers, who can understand the complexities of modern, emergent projects, and can activate and mobilize the resources needed (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). These project stakeholders and leaders of tomorrow's projects need assistance from higher education and rigorous research to give them even better tools and knowledge to shape and implement the projects' contemporary society needs. Of special importance here is to nurture and create an even more inspiring and vibrant project ecology among academics, researchers, and educators—an ecology that should not be closed, but rather inclusive, that should involve scholars, practitioners and pracademics, in other words, a person who is both a practitioner and academic in their subject area. This is where project studies can do its magic. And this is where *Project Management Journal*[®] (PMJ) could make a difference, not only as a forum for good research, but as a community to build new talent and share experiences of good research.

Hence, as we look to the horizon, PMJ discerns not only challenges. We also see opportunities to create an exciting, relevant, dynamic, and ambitious research field and thereby also increase the number of outstanding submissions that are innovative, groundbreaking, relevant, robust, and driven by a passion for scholarship and projects. At PMJ, we nurture such scholarship (Söderlund & Locatelli, 2024).

We will continue writing editorials aimed at improving submissions and reviews to PMJ. While we are not short of excellent books on research methods (e.g., Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2009), there is an objective need to tailor these methods and approaches to project studies. We will therefore continue advancing the

methodological capabilities of authors and reviewers by, for example, launching special initiatives to improve the breadth and depth of methodologies within project studies, and encourage innovative methodological approaches like incorporating advances in GenAI for data analysis. Editorials—both invited guest editorials and editorials by the regular editors—serve an important role in driving the agenda for project studies and advancing the way we should do our research. We will continue writing editorials that are intended to drive project studies forward and improve research on projects and project management.

Yet, words are not enough. We feel that it is time to pull our weight even more and have therefore decided to commit academic time and PMI resources to the development of early career researchers in project studies. With this daring ambition in mind, we are incredibly excited to launch, with the support and endorsement of the Project Management Institute, the PMJ College for Early Career Researchers in Project Studies—a global, cross-journal initiative to nurture future leading academics of our field, as explained in more detail later in this editorial. One thing that strikes us as an opportunity is an education across borders. In the past, a few places have developed a nice project ecology for academic work, for example, Carnegie Mellon School for decision-making or the Aston Group for contingency theory. These ecologies were grounded on geographical proximity. Will our new connected world open opportunities for new types of global ecologies? Could we perhaps create such an ecology around our PMJ College?

In the second section of this editorial, “The PMJ College for Early Career Researchers in Project Studies,” we cast ourselves into potential futures of project studies by sharing our new initiative—the PMJ College (what it is and how to join).

The PMJ College for Early Career Researchers in Project Studies

Joana Geraldi¹ , Giorgio Locatelli² , Jörg Sydow³ , Shazia Nauman⁴, Tristano Sainati⁵, Stewart Clegg^{6,7} , and Jonas Söderlund⁸ 

Our Vision: Nurturing Scholarly Excellence and Fostering Academic Careers

As an established field (Locatelli et al., 2023), it is now time to turn our gaze to the future of project studies, a future that rests on the next generation of scholars—current doctoral students and post-doc researchers. In the project studies community in general and PMJ in particular, we deliberately want to nurture talent. Therefore, we are thrilled to announce the new PMJ College, a two-year program developed to empower and retain talented and highly motivated doctoral students and post-docs at the early stages of their scholarly careers in project studies. The program's curriculum encompasses core aspects of the art of making science: writing, reading, reviewing, discussing, and conducting scholarly work. By immersing these burgeoning academics in the intricacies of scholarly work, the initiative aspires to reframe project studies as an enticing career trajectory and building capabilities in project studies. We also hope that the innovative ideas and energy of these emerging scholars will enhance project studies, propelling the field to be ever more relevant and fruitful.

The Program: Nurturing the Art of Making Science

At the heart of this endeavor is a structured two-year curriculum that includes four immersive workshops devoted to the art of discussing, reading, reviewing, researching, and writing. A solid understanding of the basics of research is assumed. Our workshops explore advanced skills aimed at enhancing project studies and their existing and potential contributions to our field, general management, and organization studies, more widely. Building on this foundation, we add a third year of mentorship by a member of our editorial team, demonstrating our commitment to PMJ to early career scholars.

The program aims to attain academic excellence and legitimacy by leveraging highly recognized scholars in the PMJ community, such as Stewart Clegg and Jörg Sydow, and fostering a mutual relationship between project studies and management and organization research, more often than not under the notion of temporary organizing (Bakker et al., 2016). Yet, our program is not about how to publish in highly ranked academic journals workshops or the one-off doctoral/early career

colloquia, as these are already widely available. Instead, we want to reignite what Courpasson (2013) termed the “passionate scholar.” After five years acting as editor-in-chief of *Organization Studies*, Courpasson reflected that “our current system of scientific manufacturing creates more papers to review, with less committed and less timely reviewers, with a lower density of challenging ideas, as well as of ideas that are less significant for ‘the world’” (Courpasson, 2013, p. 1246).

It is no surprise that universities in general, and business schools in particular, are facing extreme pressures and budget cuts all around the globe. We can neither afford to be self-centered nor become cheap consultants in search of *impact* or *purpose*(the buzzwords of the moment). As March (2007) warns:

“The future, like the past, is destined to be shaped by invasions of ideas and by growth in the number of scholars. ... Our task is not to discern the future in order to join it, nor even to shape it. Our task is to make small pieces of scholarship beautiful through rigour, persistence, competence, elegance and grace, so as to avoid the plague of mediocrity that threatens often to overcome us. If we do that, we may not protect scholarship from future historical waves of renewed enthusiasms, but neither will we disgrace it.” (March, 2007, p. 18)

Accordingly, we intend the program to help steer away from scientific manufacturing and toward forming passionate and engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), oriented not just to publishing but really making a difference.

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Of course, we are not naïve. Playing by the rules of the game is relevant to continue being accepted as a newly accepted member of the high circles of project, organization, and management scholarship. The *rules* include an increased focus on theorizing and formulaic research approaches required to publish in highly ranked journals (Aguinis et al., 2020), and we will also advise doctoral students and post-docs accordingly. Yet, we strongly believe that doing this should not be *the* objective so much as a by-product of excellent work. With this spirit in mind, we launch the PMJ College as one of our many initiatives to foster passionate, engaged, and competent scholarship in project studies.

While this is a PMJ initiative, we purport to contribute to project studies at large and have the full support of the *International Journal of Project Management*, the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, the *Project Leadership and Society*, and core journals supporting project studies.

Commitment to Excellence and Diversity

We are now seeking candidates for our first cohort of up to 10 doctoral students and post-docs, each embarking on research endeavors connected to project studies. The selection process is committed to meritocracy, complemented by a conscious pursuit of diversity to foster a fertile ground for rich intellectual exchange.

To enable equitable gender representation, geographical variance, and a confluence of topics, PMI is graciously offering financial support to help cover expenses associated with in-person workshops to one participant, who may otherwise be unable to attend. Those interested in applying for this financial support are required to submit a letter explaining their need. The selection criteria for financial support will be based on the demonstrated need and the standard evaluation criteria (see as follows).

Active participation is essential and required. We expect participants to engage fully in all activities and come prepared for the workshops. We also expect participants to craft their manuscripts and review their peers' work. Much of the value will be realized through mutual discussion and constructive criticism. Amid the numerous benefits bestowed on participants, the participants will receive a certification of participation as a testament to the rigorous process they have undertaken. Please note that we reserve the right to withhold certification if we perceive a lack of active involvement or preparedness from participants.

To apply for the program, the candidates are invited to submit a cover letter expressing the motivation to participate and future ambition, a three-page research proposal and, if they want to apply for financial support, a letter explaining why.

The Process

Our timeline is:

- Announcement: May 2024
- Deadline for applications: 31 August 2024

- Potentially short online interviews
- Public announcement of the new cohort in late fall 2024
- Workshops: Physical workshops will be at an international conference in the summer (June or July). The first workshop will be held online in November 2024.

Applicants are expected to submit the following documents to pmj.college@riphah.edu.pk:

- Curriculum vitae (CV) and publication list;
- Cover letter explaining their motivation to join the program;
- Three-page (plus references) proposal explaining their doctorate research/post-doc project (with a focus on the research framing, theory, and method);
- Proof of enrollment in a doctorate program at a university or business school; and
- Optional: a letter explaining why they would be unable to participate without financial support.

Entry requirements:

- Officially enrolled in a doctorate program for at least one year or holding a post-doc position at a university or business school; and
- Having a doctorate or post-doc topic that reflects an interest in project studies.

Evaluation criteria:

- Quality of the proposal (relevant research problem, insightful and creative framing and approach, sound methodology, and theoretical background);
- Relevance to project studies; and
- Ambition to stay in academia.




The committee leading the initiative will evaluate and choose candidates and assign financial support.

We are looking forward to receiving applications and nurturing our talented early researchers.

The team behind the initiative: Joana Geraldi, Jörg Sydow, Giorgio Locatelli, Shazia Nauman, Tristano Sainati, Stewart Clegg, and Jonas Söderlund, with support from PMI.

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