

## INTRODUCING THE INAUGURAL NEW VOICES IN IRISH AND SCOTTISH STUDIES ISSUE

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**T**HIS issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* foregrounds the work of early career researchers (ECRs) in Scottish studies. The contributors are all scholars who have participated in Aberdeen's Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies' (RIISS) 'New Voices in Irish and Scottish Studies' initiative.

The New Voices project was originally launched in 2020 as a webinar series that provided a platform for exciting new work by ECRs. Each session features work by a scholar from a range of humanities fields that have so far included history, literary studies, art history, music, Gaelic, Arabic and film studies. Whilst it was designed to address a reduction in professional opportunities during the global pandemic, the series has continued to thrive beyond the return to campus. It has quickly become apparent that the webinar format has enormous benefits for both participants and audience, particularly in a more peripheral geographical location like Aberdeen. Speakers can present from around the world and our audience can join us from anywhere to access global perspectives on our field.

The remit of the initiative has steadily expanded beyond the initial webinar series. Former speakers are invited to participate in biannual writing retreats in Aberdeen where the group can have time to write and to reflect together. The inaugural retreat took place in Autumn 2023, and the majority of contributors to this issue were in attendance. They were joined by postgraduate students from Aberdeen's doctoral programme. Together the scholars and student writers spent a weekend working on article projects in a structured environment and taking part in informal opportunities to build community and respond to ideas. The New Voices scholars also generously shared their postdoctoral experiences with Aberdeen's wider postgraduate community in an exceptionally well-attended roundtable.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Details of the 2023 retreat can be found here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/riiss/news-events/news/22757/>.

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This year RIISS was able to support a postdoctoral fellowship to facilitate a short research visit to the Institute. Our inaugural New Voices visiting scholar, Elisa Cozzi, spent time in Aberdeen’s archives, met with local experts on her topic and presented her project at an informal brown bag lunch session at the institute.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* represents the capstone of the New Voices approach. Published here in our Diamond open access, double-blind peer-reviewed journal, postdoctoral work is showcased on a stable, reputable, and accessible platform. As we were able to share at the recent Open Research conference at Edinburgh, this offers a sustainable solution to the problems of the growing access expectations of funders and national assessors for scholars who may not have the consistent institutional support needed for Gold or Green Access.<sup>3</sup>

## Responding to a ‘Postdoc Problem’

The New Voices initiative is a relatively small-scale response to two nesting and intertwined issues: the growing precarity of ECRs and the precarity of humanities disciplines at large. Both are rooted in major structural changes to global higher education (HE) during the last decades.

Academia has what Hannah Marie Kirton has termed a ‘postdoc problem’.<sup>4</sup> The early career stages of academics have become increasingly fraught over recent decades with large graduating cohorts and limited permanent roles.<sup>5</sup> In her preface to the 2024 Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report ‘The Lives of Early Career Researchers’, Molly Morgan Jones, director of policy at the

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2. Dr Cozzi’s visit is described here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/riiss/news-events/news/24276/>.

3. Varina Jones-Reid and Sarah Sharp, ‘Supporting Early Career Researchers through Diamond Open Access publishing: The story of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* ‘New Voices’ special issue’, *Edinburgh Open Research Conference Proceedings* 4 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.2218/eor.2025.10946>.

4. Hannah Marie Kirton, ‘The postdoc problem: To be in academia, or not to be in academia?’, *Physiology News Magazine*, 109 (Winter 2017), <https://doi.org/10.36866/pn.109.36>.

5. L. Maren Wood notes of the US context that ‘the academic job market has been competitive for decades, with many more Ph.D.s than there are full-time openings. In most disciplines, only between 10 and 20 percent of Ph.D.s secure a tenure-track job’. Sally Hancock notes a similar pattern in the UK with PhD intake expansion and ‘diminishing’ numbers of graduates securing permanent academic employment. L. Maren Wood, ‘How to Prepare for the “Worst Job Market in a Generation”’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 71: 20 (June 2025) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-prepare-for-the-worst-job-market-in-a-generation>. Sally Hancock ‘The employment of PhD graduates in the UK: what do we know?’ HEPI Blog (17 February 2020) <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/02/17/the-employment-of-phd-graduates-in-the-uk-what-do-we-know/>.

British Academy, describes the ‘increasingly uphill battle’ faced by early career scholars in the UK.<sup>6</sup>

This ‘postdoc problem’ has developed in tandem with a wider shift in employment patterns within HE. In their qualitative study of changing conditions in UK HE, Bonello and Wånggren note a ‘generational shift in academic labour’ following the ‘2007–2008 financial crisis’.<sup>7</sup> The study notes a growth in precarious employment where workers are more likely to find themselves on temporary and fractional contracts for longer. These challenges are mirrored in any other Western countries including Australia and Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

These changes have not gone unnoticed in the press. A brief review of *Guardian* HE coverage shows an uptick in concern about professional precarity amongst postdoctoral researchers in the 2010s.<sup>9</sup> However, this coverage is subsumed by Covid coverage in 2020, and since then the subsequent ongoing financial crisis in UK HE has continued to dominate the conversation. A casual reader might assume that the postdoctoral problem has gone away, but this is certainly not true. There is a growing sense that events like the pandemic have only intensified existing obstacles faced by scholars during the years following their PhD.<sup>10</sup>

At a recent meeting of Irish studies scholars, ‘The Future of Irish Studies’, global leaders in the field almost universally noted the challenges facing humanities scholarship in their home countries.<sup>11</sup> Across continents university management and governments are often articulating a vision of research and education that sidelines humanities disciplines. Smaller sub-fields like Irish and Scottish studies may be particularly vulnerable to this increasing marginalisation. In

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6. Molly Morgan Jones, ‘Preface’, *The Lives of Early Career Researchers*, HEPI Report 169 (2024), 6–8, p.6. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/29/the-lives-of-early-career-researchers/>.

7. Krista Bonello and Lena Wånggren, *Working Conditions in a Marketised University System: Generation Precarity* (Cham 2023) 1.

8. See Deirdre Flynn, ‘On Being Precarious’, *The Irish University Review*, 50:1 (2020), 51–54 <https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2020.0433> and K. Smithers, J. Harris, T. Heffernan, & S. Gurr. ‘Decasualisation and the universities accord: an examination of university approaches’, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 47(3), 2025, 282–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2462128>.

9. Between January 2014 and January 2015 *The Guardian* published a recurring feature titled ‘Postdoc Diaries’ following two Early Career Scholars in their experiences of the jobs market. There were also occasional articles drawing attention to these issues up to around 2019 when coverage lessens significantly. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/postdoc-diaries>.

10. For example, L. Maren Wood forecasts ‘the worst job market in a generation’ in a recent article for the USA-based *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. See Wood, ‘How to Prepare for the “Worst Job Market in a Generation”’.

11. The Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame and the Leuven Centre for Irish Studies organised a multi-day symposium on the future of Irish Studies at the Irish College Leuven from 27–29 June 2025. <https://ghum.kuleuven.be/lcis>.

response, scholars from Irish and Scottish studies have come together in recent years to think about how our fields can weather these storms.<sup>12</sup>

One important strand of these efforts is ensuring that our fields articulate their value to the world by remaining dynamic and continuing to participate in the urgent conversations of today. For both Irish and Scottish studies this is perhaps made more challenging by the way that romanticism and nostalgia can seem to haunt the popular reputation of these fields. This reputation can place us in danger of obsolescence. Perceptions of conservatism mask our fields' relevance to the modern world.

## New Scholars, New Ideas

As Morgan Jones notes it is often ECRs that are the:

driving force behind progress, innovation and the diversification of research fields. They are the people who engage with the most pressing issues of the day to teach, publish and debate. The long-term success of the sector relies on the sustained support and nurture of each generation of academics.<sup>13</sup>

The steady reduction in early career opportunities risks damaging the health and diversity of our field. Without stable funding and clear professional pathways, students from already under-represented backgrounds are less likely to have the resources to build careers as professional academics. Our work is impoverished by the loss of these perspectives. Perceptions of conservatism become reality.

This special issue makes the importance of early career research to innovation and diversification abundantly clear. The featured authors seek to push disciplinary boundaries and contribute to field redefining projects. Natalie Tal Harries and Anna Fancett are both postdoctoral researchers on the AHRC-funded 'The Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry: Engaging New Audiences'. Both seek to expand existing readings of one of Scotland's most canonical authors in their articles: examining Scott's 'out-of-the-way' reading practices and his representation of oral storytelling respectively. Petra Johana Poncarová's article 'Irish Content and Contributors in Ruaraidh Erskine's Gaelic Magazines' furthers

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12. See the *Future of Irish Studies* event discussed above and the preceding event in Belfast in 2024. Within Scottish Studies recent events such as the 'Unsettling Scottish Studies' workshop at Simon Fraser University in 2024 have also sought to explore these issues. RISS hosted a conference titled 'Beyond the Border: Irish and Scottish Studies, 1999–2019–2039' in November 2019 which brought the two fields together.

13. Morgan Jones, 'Preface', 1.

our understanding of Scottish-Irish connections in the editorial output of an important figure within Gaelic publishing during the early twentieth century. The other two articles turn their attention to historically marginalised groups and texts. Arianna Introna's article employs a detailed reading of James Barkses' novel *The Land of the Leal* (1939) as a 'starting point from which to speculate as to what a Scottish literary history of an expanded proletariat, whose labour and forms of struggle exceed the sphere of production, might look like.' Zosia Kuczyńska, similarly, foregrounds a single novel, Shola von Reinhold's *LOTE* (2020), to explore the possibilities of 'Queer archival praxis'.

The research in this volume tackles the issues of today and casts new light on those of the past. It is up to us as readers, supervisors and scholars in Irish and Scottish studies to help ensure the voices of the next generation of scholars can be heard into the future.