

Blog article posted on EuropeNow, Special Feature on Higher Education and Research in Europe, Ed. by I. Ulnicane, University of Vienna, and N. F. Dotti, Universite Libre Bruxelles, Issue 2, December 2016, [LINK](#)

Enhancing the Europe of Knowledge: The Untapped Potential of Reforming Academic Careers

Background

Policy reforms in higher education across Europe have addressed the need for universities to become more competitive, efficient, and responsive to societal changes. These objectives are recurring in the EU's agenda and its overarching goal of consolidating the Europe of Knowledge. It is within this context that universities have been granted by national public authorities, increasing institutional autonomy, thereby empowering their leadership. For example, funding schemes have been made more competitive, and internal structures and processes have been increasingly standardized, formalized, and centralized with the objective of transforming universities able to position themselves strategically on the market, achieving higher levels of performance (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

Personnel policies have also been addressed by reforms granting institutional autonomy. Academic research in this area has highlighted the changing regulatory framework (Estermann et al. 2011). Such studies have analyzed the level of institutional autonomy in developing personnel policies when having to comply with national higher education system goals and the EU agenda (de Boer et al. 2010). Their main findings show that even though there is a clear trend in delegating personnel policies to universities, the level of institutional autonomy varies across countries. Other researchers have illustrated how personnel policies have traditionally been developed by academics whose priorities differ across disciplines, universities, and countries, when determining the qualifications needed to enter and progress an academic career, and the way in which these qualifications are to be assessed (Kehm and Teichler 2013).

Human resource management of academic staff is also affected by internationalization, which can intensify center-periphery inequalities, and cosmopolitan versus local identities (Gouldner 1957, Enders and Musselin 2007). Moreover, the balance between state control and market coordination has been examined in relation to denationalization processes, where academics' sense of affiliation to their national higher education system has been weakening (Enders 2004). Dynamics of change are visible at different governance levels: nationally (such as governance reforms), organizationally (such as institutional strategies), and intra-organizationally (such as practices).

Against this backdrop, the European level attempts to build an “open labor market of researchers” through several instruments, such as the European Charter for Researchers, the Code of Conduct of Recruitment, and the European Blue Card, as well as conveying models of excellence across countries through the Horizon 2020 Framework program for Research and Innovation and, in particular, through the European Research Council, which aims to “support top researchers.”

Findings from recent research on academic careers in Europe

The EuroAC project (The Academic Profession in Europe: Responses to Societal Challenges, funded by the European Science Foundation and led by University of Kassel, Germany) has analyzed the transformation of the academic profession from a comparative international perspective through surveys of university staff. It has focused on how academics perceive shifts in identity, prestige, relevance, and legitimacy of academic work, as well as the impact of internationalization in universities.

The findings point to an increasing emphasis on research output—publications, funding, project management, and international networking—when it comes to recruitment and to the assessment of how a candidate fits in with the priorities of a department

The findings point to an increasing emphasis on research output—publications, funding, project management, and international networking—when it comes to recruitment and to the assessment of how a candidate fits in with the priorities of a department (Fumasoli, Goastellec and Kehm 2015). The research also points to a significant but decentralized role of management, as institutional leadership delegates deans and heads of departments in the development of personnel policies (Fumasoli 2015).

Besides the European template of academic excellence, global models like the US tenure track system have been translated into existing national structures, coexisting with traditional models such as the Habilitation in countries following German higher education. Significant variation can be observed, as tenure track is used and interpreted in different ways when it comes to the duration of trial period, criteria to fulfill to obtain tenure, and disciplinary fields. More importantly, tenure track has been introduced by a whole array of actors: universities, faculties, and departments, but also research councils attempting to boost the academic career of junior researchers (Fumasoli and Goastellec 2015). Organizational structures in universities are also evolving, following a growing trend in shifting from a chair model (involving a pyramidal hierarchy governed by one chair-holder

professor) to a department model, where differences in hierarchy are less significant (Fumasoli and Goastellec 2015). All in all, these trends have led to an increasing variety of positions according to local arrangements.

The Flagship Project (European Flagship Universities: Balancing Academic Excellence and Socio-Economic Relevance), conducted by ARENA Centre for European Studies at University of Oslo, and funded by the Research Council of Norway, has examined practices of personnel policies within the Nordic countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, as well as Austria and Switzerland. Comparing departments of psychology, chemistry, teacher education, and public health, the findings have shown that clear and transparent criteria for academic career progress are significant predictors of research performance—in some cases more important than internationalization of academic staff (Flagship departmental reports 2015, 2016). This is a significant finding because it illustrates that even if so-called inbreeding is widespread, once researchers know how to progress in their own career and academic leaders have clear clues for promoting their staff, individual and departmental strategies can be planned. This also means that both researchers and leaders face far less uncertainty about their personal futures and departmental management.

Academic Careers: Layering of Re-interpreted Global Scripts, National Regulations, Local Arrangements

By collectively controlling core personnel policy decisions, professors have traditionally guarded the boundaries defining the members of the university, as well as identifying their peers in the academic profession and deciding the criteria for quality. However, this traditional professorial control over their professional jurisdiction has been challenged by massification of higher education, globalization, and financial constraints. Scholars have pointed out how professions increasingly interact with the organized settings where professional work takes place. Global interdependent relationships, which are economic and financial, but also social, political, and cultural, have shaped complex networks that cannot be controlled completely by nation states or other collective actors, such as professionals. Academic trajectories might take place in a disparate number of higher education institutions: These provide a framework for employment conditions, possibilities, and constraints, while professionals continue to define what their expertise is about, who they are, and what they do in their work. Finally, all academic careers share common issues such as entry, tenure, and stability, which reflect both material and normative dimensions. It is nonetheless obvious that, due to economic developments (and crises), such careers have undergone major changes in competition, opportunities for job stability, and autonomy.

Against this backdrop, personnel policies have become a core governance area where different interests encounter, overlap, and conflict, and where the distinctive identities, practices, and understandings of the idea of the university are challenged and debated.

Against this backdrop, personnel policies have become a core governance area where different interests encounter, overlap, and conflict, and where the distinctive identities, practices, and understandings of the idea of the university are challenged and debated. Resistance, tensions, and disruptions emerge because changes in personnel policies and career structures affect directly the distribution of and access to resources, as well as the legitimacy of existing academic practices.

Recruitment, Promotion, and Incentives

In professional organizations, such as universities, personnel policies and recruitment constitute a key strategic area to induce change. Academics ability to conduct their roles effectively is based solely on their own expertise; therefore, organizational change can be intentionally pursued through the selection (and retention) of relevant staff. Academic excellence and performance is currently judged on quantity and quality of publications—the main prize on offer being a limited number of tenured positions, while research grant applications undergo strict peer review controls, assessing a candidate’s contribution to scientific excellence, and the production of new theoretical insights (Abbott 151). Hence, for the university to become more relevant to societal challenges and closer to its variegated constituencies, change could be brought about by modifying career structures, for example, introducing vocational education courses, increasing rewards for teaching excellence, and integrating different actors in the assessment of academic merits (ibid.150). In parallel, if a free market for researchers is to be established, academic careers could be organized around clear, widespread, shared criteria for progress. On the other hand, different countries and universities could converge on some common rules concerning academic positions and career stages, from PhD students to full professors. By providing a (minimal) European common structure for academic careers, the movement of researchers within Europe would definitely be facilitated.

Tatiana Fumasoli is a researcher in the Department of Education at the University of Oslo.

References:

Abbott, A. *Chaos of Disciplines*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2001.

de Boer, H., B. Jongbloed, J. Enders and J. File. "Progress in Higher Education Reform across Europe. Governance Reform" 1: *Executive Summary and Main Report*, Brussels: European Commission 2010.

Enders, J. and Musselin, C. "Back to the Future?" *Higher Education to 2030*, vol.1 on demography, Paris: OECD. 2007.

Estermann, T. Nokkala and M. Steinel. *University Autonomy in Europe II. The Scorecard*, European University Association. 2011.

Fumasoli, T. "Strategic Management of Academic Human Resources: A Comparative Analysis of Flagship Universities in Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and Austria." *New Voices in Higher Education Research and Scholarship*, IGI Global, 18-37. 2015.

Fumasoli and Huisman, J. *Strategic Agency and System Diversity: Conceptualizing Institutional Positioning in Higher Education*. *Minerva*, 51(2), 155-169. 2013.

Fumasoli, T. and Goastellec, G. "Global Models, Disciplinary and Local Patterns in Academic Recruitment Processes," *Academic Careers in Europe – Trends, Challenges, Perspectives*, Dordrecht: Springer. 2015.

Fumasoli, T. and Goastellec, G. "Global models, disciplinary and local patterns in academic recruitment processes." *Academic Work and Careers in Europe: Trends, Challenges, Perspectives* *Academic Work and Careers in Europe. Trends, Challenges, Perspectives*. Springer, 69-93. 2015

Fumasoli, Tatiana & Goastellec, Gaële. [Recruitment of academics in Switzerland: e pluribus unum?](#) , In *Forming, Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*. Springer Publishing Company. 145-161. 2015.

Gouldner, Alvin W. Cosmopolitans and Locals: Toward an Analysis of Latent Social Roles. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2(3), 281-306.

Höhle, E.A. and U. Teichler. 'The Teaching Function of the Academic Profession', in *The Changing Academy*, vol.8, Springer. 2013.

Kehm, B.M. and U. Teichler. *The Academic Profession in Europe*, Springer. 2013.

"Jobs." Rights. Accessed 2015.

<http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/europeanCharter>.

"EU Blue Card – Work and Live in Europe." EU Blue Card RSS. Accessed 2015. <http://www.eu-bluecard.com/>.

“European Flagship Universities (FLAGSHIP).” (completed). Accessed 2015.
<http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/projects/flagship/>.

Published on December 1, 2016.