Academic Career Structures: Bad Ideas

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Successful universities and academic systems require career structures for the academic profession that permit a stable academic career, encourage the "best and brightest" to join the profession, reward the most productive for their work, and weed out those who are unsuited for academic work. We have been struck by the dysfunctional nature of career structures in many countries—with disturbing negative trends—and would, only with a small sense of irony, suggest a ranking for career structures that guarantee to fail to build a productive academic profession. Our serious point is this: without a career structure that attracts quality, rewards productivity, and permits stability, universities will fail in their mission of high-quality teaching, innovative research, and building a "world-class" reputation.

Taxicabs and Nontenure Track

A few examples will illustrate how poorly designed or badly implemented academic career structures can have a severely negative impact on the profession—and ultimately on the future of higher education. Many look to the United States as the world's leading university system and to the American professoriate as highly productive. The US "up-or-out" tenure system is seen as a rigorous but effective way of ensuring careful selection while at the same time providing a clear career path. While the system has been criticized for downplaying teaching and sometimes imposing unrealistic time constraints on junior staff, it is widely seen as effective. The problem is that fewer than half of new academic appointments in the United States are made on the traditional "tenure stream"; most new appointments are either part-time or full-time contracts. While the situation is somewhat better at the top institutions, this new arrangement makes an academic career impossible for participants of this new system. While this policy may save money and increase flexibility in the short run, it will have a highly negative impact on the American academic profession. The first increasing difficulty involves attracting the most qualified individuals to academe and constrains young researchers while autonomy should be provided at an age when creativity and innovation are usually at the highest levels.

Argentina may come close to the top rank for irrationality and complexity. Although the large proportion of Argentine academics have low-paid part-time appointments (the original "taxicab professors"), the minority who have full-time appointments face a bizarre career path. If a faculty member wishes to be promoted to the highest academic rank, he or she must submit to a *"concours"* where the position occupied by the incumbent is open to applicants from all over the country or indeed the world. In other words, these academics are not promoted on the basis of their performance but may instead have to struggle for "their" job against other applicants. The only saving grace is that the system is often so inefficient that the *concours* is not organized and the incumbent is promoted anyway. Needless to say, the *concours* system produces immense stress among academics and deters many from entering the profession or from applying to proceed upward in the ranks.

European Anomalies

In France, the access to a first permanent position as *maître de conférences* occurs rather early compared with other countries (on average prior to the age of 33 years) and opens the path to 35 to 40 years of an academic career. These recruitments happen after a period of high uncertainty as in almost all disciplines the ratio of "open positions per doctors" has worsened, while the doctoral degree is still not recognized as a qualification by businesses or the public sector. Recruiting a new *maître de conférences* thus constitutes a high-stake decision making. But currently university departments have about two months to examine the candidates, select some of them, hold a 20- to 30-minute interview with those on the short list, and rank the best ones. Despite the highly selective process that the first candidate on the list successfully passes, this new colleague is rarely considered as a chance on which to build by the recruiting university. Not only is the salary based on a national bureaucratic scale below the average GDP per capita for France, but new academics are frequently not offered a personal office and may be asked to teach the classes colleagues do not want to offer or to accept administrative duties. The difficult road toward the doctorate leads to a rather disappointing and frequently non-well-remunerated situation, thus undermining the attractiveness of the career.

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In Germany, the access to a stable career occurs much later than in France, at 42 on average for a first tenured position as professor. From the doctorate to the professorship, most young academics spend many years in the *Mittelbau*—as postdocs, research assistants, or other positions. Survivors of this long

and uncertain period of apprenticeship become autonomous professors who negotiate the number of assistantships, thus replicating as professors what they experienced in the *Mittelbau*. For sound reasons, a 2002 reform was intended to oppose the negative consequences of the long period of apprenticeship and to increase the institutional control over professors. Merit-based salaries were thus introduced for all new professors. The resources they receive when they are recruited cover three to five years and are renegotiated according to their performance. However, most academics find the new income system less satisfactory than the former. On top of that, the reform creates quasi tenure-track positions for young scholars, who thus become more independent from senior professors.

It is too early to tell if these new positions will lead more easily to professorships as there are currently fewer than 800. This turnabout may discourage academics in the traditional *Mittelbau*, who still experience the control of professors but know that if they themselves become professors the long apprenticeship period may be undermined by an autonomous apprenticeship; professors would also face income conditions that are simultaneously less attractive.

Several European countries—including Germany, France, and Russia—retain a system that requires a second doctoral dissertation to be completed before a person can attain the highest academic rank, thus adding midcareer stress and maintaining an old arrangement that may have worked in the days before mass higher education but is now dysfunctional and widely criticized.

> *In France, the access to a first permanent position as maître de conférences occurs rather early compared with other countries*

Conclusion

We are not prepared to offer our mock ranking since it would be difficult to award a top rank to a single impaired academic career system; there is much competition. In fact, global trends indicate that the path to an academic career is becoming more difficult and less attractive. This pattern will not help the improvement of universities worldwide. For an academic system or a university to be successful, it requires an effective, fair, and transparent means of ensuring that an academic career is possible, that a professional and transparent process is attractive for scholars, and that an evaluation system is in place so that merit can be rewarded and appropriate selections made. Scholars entering the profession need access to a clear and achievable career path and assurance that high standards of performance provide career stability and success. Procedures must be rigorous and meritocratic, and institutions must have confidence that only competence will be rewarded. At the same time, evaluation systems must not be overly complicated. Mobility within academic systems is desirable. The various aspects of academic performance—including teaching, research, and service to the university and society—must be assessed, although the balance among these elements may vary according to the mission of the specific institution. Career stability and a guarantee of academic freedom must be ensured. An American-style tenure system performs this role, but there are other arrangements as well. Evaluation systems, of course, need to take into account national traditions and realities. One thing is clear—universities and systems that score high on the dysfunctionality rankings will find it difficult to succeed in a competitive world. ■

Degree Mills: The Impact on Students and Society

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Degree mills are impeding the efforts to assure quality in higher education—a significant national issue for some time and now an international concern. In response, the US-based Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recently joined with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to bring together an informal group of higher education and quality assurance/accreditation leaders to focus on degree mills.

The Traits of Degree Mills

Degree mills are spurious or even fraudulent providers of higher education and training, offering degrees and certificates that may be considered bogus. At first glance, a degree mill frequently looks like a typical college or university, with publications (either print or electronic) displaying attractive campus facilities, logos that appear steeped in tradition, and a list of impressively credentialed faculty. Closer attention, however, often reveals that the so-called "campus" is just a post office box, the logo has been borrowed (and cleverly modified) from a well-known institution, and the list of faculty contains individuals who "may" be teaching at some point but are not in fact permanent professionals affiliated with the operation.

Without a single, commonly accepted, definition, most mills