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# 14. European tenure track(s): trends and challenges

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## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF ACADEMIC CAREERS IN EUROPE

Universities operate in a societal environment characterised by continuous change and uncertainty. Like all organisations, universities adapt to their changing environment and develop as organisations (Seeber et al., 2015). The different tenure track systems in European universities exemplify the changing landscape of higher education policy and practices. Exogenous change drivers alter the operational environment of universities and thus put pressures on higher education management, while endogenous change drivers transform universities and the nature of academic work. Exogenous and endogenous drivers are connected and sometimes overlap, and their impact on the academic career system requires more analysis. The analysis of academic careers requires a comprehensive understanding and systemic approach that examines careers at different levels: national (academic career frameworks [ACF]), organisational (academic career models [ACM]) and individual (academic career path [ACP]) (Chapter 2).

Trends related to developing public management, such as New Public Management (NPM) and managerialism, have influenced public organisations and universities. These trends have made universities like businesses, emphasising efficiency, standardisation of structures, control of academic work and strong (hierarchical) management structures (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Evetts, 2009; Ferlie & Fitzgerald, 2002; Siekkinen et al., 2019; Waring, 2017). In addition, academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) emphasises market-like behaviour in the university context and supports the shift towards more entrepreneurial universities, which has also transformed academics into being more like entrepreneurs. There are also

societal pressures on universities to be relevant, impactful and efficient in their research and teaching functions (Bleiklie et al., 2017).

Tenure track systems are linked to trends in university management, they manifest the power of university human resource management (HRM) functions, and they are closely linked to the performance discourse currently emphasised in academic work (Kallio et al., 2015; Leisyte, 2022). Organisational career models are built for hiring and retaining highly accomplished individuals with probationary periods, including qualification assessments, which typically align with national and institutional goals set for the advancement of academics. Tenure track positions also harmonise academic career models to better align with international and EU-level funding schemes and respond to new national funding instruments. Additionally, efforts are made to standardise career progression between different sectors of academic work, such as universities and research institutes.

Tenure track positions involve recruiting and retaining international talent, competing in international academic labour markets, providing predictable and attractive career prospects and creating flexible entry points for academic careers. They also offer the opportunity to tailor academic careers to individual needs, goals and responsibilities, including family and other obligations.

The term 'tenure track' holds various meanings across European higher education systems, and institutional definitions may vary even within individual systems. Depending on administrative traditions, tenure track may represent mere rhetorical changes to existing promotion practices or revolutionary shifts in the entire concept of an academic career. Implementing new position types and recruitment methods can range from being a specific HRM instrument within a system to a comprehensive reform of the career framework.

The tenure track system is new in European countries. It was introduced to the universities in the wake of the NPM- and managerialism-inspired reforms and legislative changes that, depending on the country, date to the early 2000s (in Austria and Italy, for example) or to more recent legislative changes in the 2020s (such as in France) underlining performance-based management, efficiency and excellence. The tenure track system was introduced around 2015 or later in most of the case countries.

As summarised by Vukasovic and Huisman (2017), European integration has added a new coordinating policy layer based on soft law in higher education, which is typically under the jurisdiction of member states. Examples of this new policy layer based on open coordination, beyond the competence of the European Union, are initiatives related to educational structures and quality of education from the late 1990s and early 2000s, namely the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process. Moving closer to academic careers, the European strategies have also reached PhD education in Europe. The European University Association, with a mandate from a European ministerial group, developed

the so-called Salzburg principles (2005) and recommendations (2010), providing a framework for European doctoral education and related employment and career aspects (Kivistö et al., 2017).

Open coordination has also reached the personnel policies of higher education. In the 2000s, several initiatives worked to harmonise the career structure and create European labour markets. These include (Pausits et al., 2022) the European Commission's Charter and Code for researchers published in 2005. These publications consist of principles for researchers and employers and funders in relation to working conditions, recruitments, evaluation and so on. The Commission (EC) has further increased the impact of these 'soft law' documents by introducing the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R), which is a process including self-assessment and peer review and a right for the university to use the 'HR Excellence in Research Award' to indicate that they have aligned their HR policies with Charter and Code. The first awards were granted in 2010.

European research funding is also one way of coordinating academic careers. European Research Council (ERC) grants (Beerkens, 2019) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships (MSCF) (Melkers et al., 2023) have a significant impact on European academic careers, especially career progression (Beerkens, 2019), and career structures are formed so that they apply to European funding. For instance, tenure track positions are one way to provide access to permanent career tracks for MSCF fellows and to attach the prestige and potential of ERC holders to their host institutions (Melkers et al., 2023). The number of European-funded positions is limited, and the number of grant holders remains low. As a new initiative to increase open coordination based on European excellence, the EC, as part of its research and innovation framework programme (2014–2020), has launched the European Seal of Excellence programme, which provides a quality seal for excellent grant applications left without funding. This seal has also been applied to MSCF and ERC proof of concept grants. Such labels can encourage other science funders to use the EC's evaluation outcomes (Edlund, 2023). Regardless of the open coordination, the European academic landscape is still far from uniform (Crosier et al., 2017).

## THE TENURE TRACK SYSTEM IN EUROPE: A TREND AND PRACTICE

As described in this book, the tenure track system was introduced in Europe as an alternative to the more traditional career model. It has not, however, entirely replaced the traditional system but exists in parallel. Since there is no universal definition of tenure track, it can be considered a managerial trend in the context of universities. Related to managerial trends of different kinds, Abrahamson

(1991) distinguishes between managerial fashion and fads. Management fashion is a trend led by an external organisation, such as a consultancy firm. In times of uncertainty, organisations often follow fashion-setting organisations, such as consultancy companies or international organisations. Management fads, by contrast, are trends imitated by other organisations within the same sector. Carson et al. (1999, p. 321) describe management fads as 'managerial interventions which appear to be innovative, rational, and functional and are aimed at encouraging better organizational performance'.

Tenure track development can be considered as a typical managerial fad; however, it is also influenced by trend-setting organisations, such as the World Bank (Arnhold et al., 2018). Universities have no clear leading system or organisation that is directly imitated. The US higher education system and US universities act as a heuristic point of comparison, and in most national systems, pioneers lead the way in developing tenure track, providing a benchmark for other organisations to follow.

Typical reasons for following trends relate to external pressures, internal factors and conforming forces (Carson et al., 1999). The external pressures for developing tenure track are related to the endogenous factors discussed previously in this volume. In many countries, universities must develop new personnel policies and practices because they have a new, more autonomous role. In other words, changing legislation on academic careers and titles, and especially decreasing regulations, push universities to develop their personnel policies. The tenure track system provides a framework to comprehensively develop academic careers. Organisational-level career models are often tools to implement, apply and exploit national policies and funding schemes. These models are also used to increase performance-based funding, improve the efficiency of academic work and help develop academics because of new types of audit and accreditation.

Internal factors also push towards the development of tenure track. In the case of universities and their career systems, these internal factors are not purely intra-organisational but often also inter-organisational trends that organisations are not required to follow but internally do so. The reasons for implementing new structures may be based on a positive differentiation argument. The organisations may want to be different from others (profiling thematically and as an employer) to attract talent, or they may be frustrated with old (bureaucratic) career structures. With the development of new practices, the universities are also signalling that they have a dynamic organisational culture in which they are ready to take risks in having new openings and respond to new societal challenges.

In addition to exogenous and endogenous factors, conforming forces have also influenced the development of tenure track systems. Universities implement these systems because other universities have chosen to develop their

career systems in the same direction. To be competitive, novel and attractive, universities adopt internal responses to external forces that have already been tested by others. These trends are easy to implement, and going against them would demand more work.

Universities are especially good for conformation, as their work practices are already based on international standards and their faculty members often work in international disciplinary settings with external colleagues. However, national conditions of employment in general, and academic work in particular, shape the practices related to the fad more than the vocabulary used. This leads to a situation in which even the fundamental component of the tenure fad might have a multitude of meanings in the context of the tenure track system.

## Tenure Track as a National and Organisational Response to International Development

In some countries (such as Estonia and Finland), there is no government regulation of the tenure track model, and individual HEIs can decide for themselves what kind of processes and practicalities to implement, while, in other countries (including Italy, Austria and Portugal), the tenure track system is regulated and therefore similar in all universities. Regardless of these external pressures, however, the tenure track systems share some commonalities.

At least to some extent, all models resemble the US-based tenure track model, which offers three career ladders: assistant professor, associate professor and full professor. Tenure is either given after the assistant professor stage (as in Portugal) or after the associate professor stage (in Finland). However, tenure tracks can also be implemented without fixed terms (all tenure track candidates have permanent positions in Estonia, for example), and not all tenure tracks lead to full professorship (such as Italy).

In some countries (including Italy, Austria and Finland), researchers tend to spend a few years (often two to six) as a postdoctoral researcher or contract researcher before entering the tenure track stream. Often, this is not a requirement (for example to obtain eligibility, as in Austria), but is forced by the situation as competition for tenure track positions tends to be high. The relationship between postdoctoral positions and tenure track seems to be problematic in many countries, as is the level of the assistant professor compared with traditional academic positions.

Four basic rationales exist for the tenure track system. First, in most cases, the system provides job security and a more predictable career. In many of the European countries discussed in this book, the traditional model for academic positions was often based on a succession of fixed-term contracts. However, the ability of the tenure track system to increase job security varies from country to country. In Estonia, where all tenure track staff are on permanent contracts,

security is relatively weak, as the employer has the right to terminate a permanent contract with up to 90 days' notice. In the Portuguese system, however, the tenure track stream offers additional security because, beyond providing a permanent contract (which is guaranteed for all professors after the five-year probationary period in the first rank), tenure guarantees job security even if the university faces financial problems.

Second, the tenure track model aims to increase the attractiveness of academic careers and appeal to the best candidates. The third rationale relates to the efficiency of academic work. The planning and design of tenure track models have been influenced by performance-based funding systems, the drive for excellence and better value for money and national variants of NPM. For example, in the Italian case (Chapter 8), the tenure track system is seen as a *numerus clausus* apparatus that contributes to the cost-effective selection and recruitment of academics. Furthermore, as described in many of the country case studies, the tenure track system is a means for institutions to ensure value for money in their recruitment, as a certain number of publications and other merits (such as editorial board memberships and teaching merits) must be achieved to secure a tenure track position.

The fourth rationale is to increase fairness, equity and gender equality through the meritocratic (as measured through quantitative and qualitative measures) ideals associated with the tenure track system. In addition to gender, this rationale can also be applied to other minority groups, such as international scholars or those from minority ethnic backgrounds (see Chapters 1, 5 and 8).

## CONTEXTUAL PROBLEMS AND SHARED CHALLENGES

As mentioned, the tenure track system has been introduced in many countries as an additional layer or option to the traditional system. This has created a risk of dividing academic staff into two different groups. This stratification of career models within an institution can lead to different types of challenge. First, the tenure track system may lead to internal challenges, as it stratifies the field and divides academics into tenured and non-tenured staff (see Chapter 11, for example)).

At the institutional level, tenure track has increased management and administrative work by introducing new structures on top of existing ones as well as the need for continuous evaluation and supervision of academic staff. Different statutes and career models can also complicate management and administration because they have unique specificities, for example in France (see Chapter 6).

Notwithstanding the aim of creating more attractive and secure careers, tenure track systems can also have unintended consequence of creating less

attractive and less secure careers. Increased evaluation and performance targets can increase insecurity as opposed to strong individual and professional autonomy, even in cases where the tenure track candidate is in a strategic position compared with other academics at the same career stage. In some countries, such as Norway, permanent positions, such as assistant professorships, are also offered without tenure (which includes the evaluation phase and is not a permanent position as such). Therefore, as Korseberg and Hovdhaugen argue (Chapter 10), the best academics may apply directly for the permanent position, as the tenure track model is not seen as an additional benefit but rather as weakening the contract due to having more precarity.

One of the aims of tenure track identified in this book is to attract internationally prominent scholars (see Chapters 5 and 10, for example). However, the extent to which the tenure track is sufficient or necessary for this task depends on the country. In Norway, the tenure track system has not significantly increased the number of international researchers, while, in Finland, the share of international applicants for tenure track positions is higher than for traditional positions. Even before introducing tenure track, Norwegian universities attracted many international early-career researchers, thus increasing the pool from which more senior international researchers could be selected. In both cases, the tenure track system may superficially appear to be a panacea for the increasing internationalisation of HEIs, but, as the cases here show, in addition to introducing new structural elements, career practices and organisational as well as professional cultures need to adapt for more comprehensive changes to take place.

In terms of gender equality, the tenure track system can have both positive and negative outcomes. As Anzivino and Vaira discussed in Chapter 8 about Italy, women may find it more difficult to access tenure, which naturally increases inequalities and hinders gender parity in permanent, senior positions. Similarly, O'Connor and Drew analysed the Irish situation in Chapter 9 and concluded that the tenure track system may reproduce male dominance in academia. If processes and procedures are implicitly gendered, for example through the tenure track system, then that is just another system reproducing male dominance in academia. The Finnish data (Chapter 5) indicate that, while the tenure track model attracts more international applicants, the proportion of female applicants is declining, suggesting that it may be difficult for universities to attract female academics, particularly international ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a policy trend, the tenure track model is common in European countries. It has been used to reform academic employment and career progression. It is

also used by university HRM as a response to global, societal and organisational challenges to which universities need to adapt.

The scale and scope of higher education reform related to restructuring academic careers have varied across Europe, from a complete redesign of academic careers to additional funding for new positions. It is too early to speak of a single European tenure track system, as academic, organisational and administrative traditions differ from country to country. However, we can talk about tenure track systems in Europe now and in the future because the experiments being launched now will lead to a new cohort of academics who will carry the tenure track model with them for at least one academic generation.

In analysing the academic careers, we propose the use of a more systemic approach that considers national academic career frameworks (ACFs), organisational academic career models (ACMs) and individual academic career paths (ACPs) as well as exogenous and endogenous drivers of change that affect them in different ways at different levels (Chapter 2). All these structures and phenomena are dynamic, interconnected and sometimes overlapping and often exist as nested (Pekkola et al., 2020). They require further analysis with more extensive empirical data.

A similar development of academic career structures can be observed in European universities, where the accelerating competition in academic work divides academics into 'winners' and 'losers' (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2015) and polarises the academic profession into a 'tenured core' and a 'precarious periphery' (Kimber, 2003). Moreover, junior and mid-career academics may be stuck in precarious positions, which can be seen as an 'Uberisation' of academic work (Carvalho et al., 2022).

Consequently, tenure-track positions may contribute to the vertical and horizontal differentiation of academics, as professors on a tenure track career path may have more prestige, power and resources than academics in other positions. The polarisation of the academic profession at the European level could create a European 'elite', including tenure track professors.

In light of the fact that European universities have responded to recent challenges in a rather similar manner, it is possible that the academic landscape in Europe will become increasingly homogeneous, particularly in relation to academic careers. As the recruitment and promotion of academics continue to reflect the same managerialist and neoliberal ideals of academic work, they could have a significant impact on the academic profession in the future.

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