

The Max Weber Programme Academic Careers Observatory

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Are you thinking about applying for a post-doc or a lectureship but don't know where to start looking, or what your chances are as a foreign citizen in France, Norway or the UK? Does your academic idealism stretch to accepting a gross monthly salary of € 100 for postdoctoral research in Ukraine, or would you rather go for the € 4,560 paid for the same position in Denmark? Do you have the choice between a lectureship at a Spanish university, a *Juniorprofessur* in Germany or a tenure track Assistant Professorship in a US university in the mid-West, and do you know what the differences are in career perspectives? In a broader sense, is the European Research and Higher Education Area one of open and fair competition for the development of academic careers, and is it building up its human resources and excellence in research and academia for the 21st Century Knowledge Society?

The Max Weber Programme Academic Careers Observatory (MWP-ACO) at the European University Institute was set up in January 2007 to help answer such questions. It is an online resource for researchers and scholars at all stages of their careers, with a special focus on the social sciences and humanities. It provides reliable and comprehensive data to bridge the gap between the conviction that mobility in the academic profession is essential to attain excellence, and the fact that this same mobility is hindered by the lack of easily available information on academic careers. Remarkably, no such initiative has been made before.

The information offered by the MWP-ACO goes from career curricula, promotion requirements and salary levels to practical information on the academic profession. The Observatory also examines the degree of openness of different academic systems and functions as a tool for job search offering links to job platforms, as well as a list of available funding for scholars from the post-doc level onwards. An extensive bibliography contains references to specialised literature about academic careers. More than twenty countries are analysed at present (from Sweden to Portugal and from the USA to Japan) and the list is expanding rapidly, with the support of users giving feedback and a network of collaborators from within and outside the EUI community (Max Weber Fellows, 'national' contacts, etc.).

On 30 November 2007, the MWP-ACO organised the conference 'Academic Careers in the Social Sciences and Humanities: National Comparisons and Opportunities' at Villa La Fonte. The symposium



analysed some of the striking observations made by the Observatory:

- There are marked variations in academic careers across countries, despite the homogenisation of the higher education system
- The gap between open academic systems welcoming scholars from outside and self-protecting closed systems
- The existence of marked national variations in entry to the academic system and job security
- It is becoming increasingly normal to spend one or more years as a postdoctoral researcher before obtaining a more permanent and secure academic position.

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Variations in academic careers across countries

While the higher education system is currently undergoing wide reaching changes in most European countries due to the Bologna Process, academic careers still differ markedly. As a result, switching between academic systems is not always easy. For instance, France has two career steps (assistant professor and ►►

- ▶ professor), whereas universities in the Netherlands have three (lecturer, senior lecturer and professor), and British academia has four (lecturer, senior lecturer, reader and professor). In addition to the heterogeneity of scales, there are cumbersome barriers to entry in the form of different procedures and criteria used for hiring and promotion. For example, the German data show that the reforms introduced by some governments to make the academic workplace more attractive and to counter the brain drain from the European continent to the Anglo-Saxon countries, does not necessarily translate into an 'open and competitive European Research and Higher Education Area tenure track system'.

Open and closed academic systems

From an international perspective some countries are undoubtedly more attractive than others. For instance, even after recent reforms neither the centralised French system nor the decentralised German structure can compete with the Anglo-Saxon academic world. Yet the problem is not necessarily marked differences in salary or job security; in fact, academics in the UK do not get (much) higher salaries (in real terms), nor are their positions tenured. The success of the Anglo-Saxon system instead seems to depend on a mix of factors including a healthy competition between universities, decent career prospects in exchange for hard work, high levels of mobility and openness to non-nationals, all of which creates a more vibrant academic community. That fact that English is the *lingua franca* of academia forces the continental European countries even more onto the defensive. Only the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and some more or less isolated initiatives in other countries (e.g. some Turkish universities are fairly open) seem to understand that effective openness is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to be competitive and attract the best researchers and academics.

Entry barriers and job security

In some countries, young academics have to contend with high formal and informal barriers to obtain staff positions. Italy is often mentioned as a paradigmatic example of a closed system with low levels of mobility. Jobs can be obtained, but the official procedure is lengthy and cumbersome and the outcome of a competition is usually settled beforehand. Connections are crucial and non-Italians rarely have a chance. Moreover, whereas job security is high (as in France, appointments are for life), but salaries only become attractive towards the end of the career. As a result, a large number of young Italian academics develop their career outside Italy, deterred from becoming the generation that will replace a large generation of university professors entering retirement in the coming years. Other countries, such as Spain, have launched interesting open programmes

for young researchers and have good examples of open universities, but the system as a whole is far from being open and competitive.

The postdoctoral limbo

The postdoctoral level is increasingly becoming a proper career step, rather than merely the antechamber of a lectureship. The internationalisation of academic careers is most advanced at the postdoctoral stage and the existence of international grant programmes has significantly increased over the past decade. The Max Weber Programme at the EUI, which started in 2006, exemplifies both aspects: each year forty promising young scholars from across the world receive specialised training in research, teaching and academic advancement in an interdisciplinary environment.

Yet the rise of the post-doc carries the risk that Ph.D. holders find themselves trapped in temporary postdoctoral research or teaching positions for too many years. In several academic systems, the postdoctoral phase has become the bottleneck in the academic career. In countries like Belgium and Germany, for instance, one can hold a fairly attractive postdoctoral position for up to six years, but this is not a 'tenure track' position since even if one excels there may not be a chance of being appointed to a more stable position afterwards. To minimise frustration and a brain drain, some governments need to pursue more in-depth reforms of their higher education and research organisation systems in order not to waste valuable human resources and academic/intellectual expertise.

To conclude, a 'call for support' is in order. The MWP Academic Careers Observatory maps and analyses the national systems and compares them at the international level. Reliable 'insider information' from 'users' is essential; for example, in order to discover the informal barriers in certain countries and to keep up with legal changes in the systems, as well as to find the 'best experiences'. Therefore, the MWP-ACO deliberately operates on an interactive basis; everyone is strongly encouraged to access the website and use the comment buttons to send observations or correct and modify pages and information where needed. The interactive discussion forum, which is currently being developed, will be an excellent floor from which to present queries and to debate all aspects of academic careers with the entire scholarly community.

The MWP-ACO has been developed by Lotte Holm and Arnout Mertens as one of the initiatives of the Max Weber Programme, directed by Professor Ramon Marimon. ■

www.eui.eu/MaxWeberProgramme/AcademicCareers