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Tenure Track Tensions: Academic Career Paths in a Deregulated Sector

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Abstract

In this paper we are investigating how career tracks are being developed at Swedish higher education institutions in the aftermath of a new autonomy reform, launched in 2011. The study is based on semi-structured interviews and documentary studies from three Swedish universities of which one is a business private, one is a technical university and one is a comprehensive university. All three universities have introduced tenure track systems based on promotion criteria. The paper revolves around some of the tensions/key issues we have identified in relation to tenure track systems. These include the scope of the tenure track in relation to other academic posts, the use of hard (metrics) or soft (peer review) promotion criteria, the division of academic tasks, and mobility (international and across industries). The results show big differences between the universities, e.g. regarding the scope of the tenure track and the use of promotion criteria.

Introduction

From having, in the past, been organised in a regional or national framework, higher education and research have become international and worldwide political issues. HEIs are expected to take part in the global competition for staff, students and financial resources. Manifestations include ranking lists, national stratification of HEIs, targeted funding of centres of excellence, mergers or alliances of institutions and departments, new (master) study programmes taught in English (Bleiklie 2003; Ramirez 2010).

For many years, the academic career systems have been described as a critical factor for the future of research and higher education. The recruitment and the retention of academic staff are some of the main challenges for HEIs. Hence, the attractiveness of the academic profession is an important issue. Academic work has undergone profound changes the last decades and earlier studies have shown that the traditional academic roles have been challenged and restructured (e.g. Bentley & Kyvik 2012; Coates & Goedegebuure 2012; Musselin 2012; Leisyte & Dee 2012; Kyvik 2013). The higher education sector has also experienced a professionalisation of administrative staff (Gornitzka & Larsen 2004) and the establishment of new professional groups in a “third space” in between administration/support and academic duties (Whitchurch 2009).

Earlier research has shown that working conditions for academic staff are crucial for high level performance. In many European countries, academic working conditions have been described as demanding, even at a crisis point. The academic career is not attractive enough to attract the best talents, it has been argued. One of the things in focus is the academic career structure, or rather the lack of such a structure (Bentley & Kyvik 2012). In the US, with its

long traditions of tenure track systems, the proportion of tenure track staff has dropped steadily. In 1970 three quarters of the academic staff were on tenure track positions; while in 2007 that figure was down to 30%. In the EU, tenure availability varies widely depending on country and institution, and it does not necessarily mean the same thing, especially regarding job security and benefits, that it does in the US (Nature 2010).

The aim of this paper is to investigate how three universities act strategically in relation to the new opportunities provided by a new autonomy reform launched in 2011. One of the consequences of the reform was a deregulation of academic careers.

Two main questions are posed in this paper:

Q1 What roles do the tenure track systems play in the institutional strategies?

Q2 How do the tenure track systems work in practice?

Methodology

Since the aim of the paper is to understand the policy and practice of academic careers, we have chosen a qualitative method based on the analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews. The policy documents include staff regulations and guidelines for promotions. The interviews have been conducted with both managers and academics, both on and off tenure track positions.

We have chosen a case study approach, including three universities, of which one is comprehensive, one is single-faculty (technical) and one is single-faculty (private non-profit). In total, 43 interviews have been conducted at the three Swedish universities. Each interview lasted for one hour on average. The analysis has been made thematically. During the analysis we identified the “tensions” which are guiding the reader through the paper.

Results

Tenure track: exclusive elitist group or main career path?

From an institutional perspective, the introduction of a tenure track system is mainly about attractiveness. The rationale behind a structured career path is to offer a transparent, long-term career with attractive working conditions.

In the interviews, we asked about the role of tenure track in the decision to work at the institution. For some interviewees, including international candidates, it was considered decisive. While considering offers from other European universities, a tenure track system with a permanent position as a clear goal was more attractive.

Determining the proportion of tenure track staff and following from that, the roles and responsibilities, are major strategic issues.

One conclusion is that it differs significantly within the universities; whereas for some units the main career path is the tenure track, for others it is an elite route for a selected few. One of the determining factors is funding. While at some units, most tenure track positions are funded with internal money (direct state funding), external funding is a prerequisite for tenure

track recruitment at other. For academic staff off tenure track, it is less obvious which role they might play.

How to get tenure

The tenure track systems in focus are based on promotion accompanied by assessment criteria. In order to get tenure, certain demands have to be met. One of the things we have studied has been the practical use of promotion criteria. The tension we have observed concerns the use of so called hard criteria, mainly quantitative e.g. publications, or soft assessment, e.g. peer review of not only track record but also the candidate's future potential. From the interviews, we can conclude that tenure track members look for and demand specific criteria with clear goals. The rationale is to secure as high transparency and prediction as possible. Managers and decision-makers, on the other hand, prefer as soft criteria as possible because it increases their room for manoeuvre. Each preference seems perfectly rational, in relation to position.

One of the main issues is the balance between different academic tasks. Our results indicate that research is seen as the main task, and the critical one regarding promotion. You have to have your publications in place; otherwise there will be no promotion. As far as teaching is concerned, this also counts, but there is a threshold level to which to relate. Above that level, teaching becomes a burden which takes time from research, i.e. a threat to promotion.

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