

Spanish university sued for favouritism...

[BARCELONA] The University of Salamanca in Spain is being taken to court by an astrophysicist who claims that a bias towards internal candidates denied him an associate professorship in its department of general and atmospheric physics.

A university panel has already rejected an appeal by the astrophysicist, Antonio Ferriz Mas. It argues that, despite having better scientific qualifications than the individual appointed, his speciality of fluid dynamics was "significantly different" from the department's requirements, namely atmospheric dynamics and thermodynamics.

But Ferriz Mas says the university has violated the principles of equality and meritocracy in assessing applicants for the post. University officials are not commenting publicly on the charges, which will probably take one to two years to reach court.

The administration of public universities in Spain has improved following reforms in 1983. But the selection process for professors, known as the '*concurso-oposición*', is still widely seen as a considerable barrier to the development of high quality research.

A contract researcher already employed in a department is frequently given a tenured position, for example, even if they are not the most scientifically qualified applicant.

Under the 1983 law, appointment boards must have five members, at least three of whom must vote for the approved candidate. Two members come from the department concerned, and three from other universities. But often the crucial third vote for a local candidate is said to be easily obtained.

Many concerned parties — including vice-chancellors and officials at the Ministry of Education and Culture — are now backing a change in the law to give each university department only one vote, that of chair of the appointment board (see below).

Ferriz Mas worked at the University of Freiburg in Germany for three years as a PhD fellow and five as a postdoctoral researcher.



Antonio Ferriz Mas: appealing rejection.

He returned to Spain in October 1994 under a programme sponsored by the government for 'reincorporating' researchers. A month later he applied for a post in earth physics, astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Salamanca, and spent six months preparing the teaching project on atmospheric dynamics and thermodynamics.

There were three candidates for the post. In the first part of the examination, based on research experience and proposed teaching project, the examiners gave Ferriz Mas three points. The local candidate, who was put forward by the department and was eventually awarded the post, received the top mark of five. The second exam, which involved giving a lecture, resulted in an equal score.

Ferriz Mas appealed against the decision. A year later, an appeal panel, chaired by vice-chancellor Ignacio Berdugo Gómez de la Torre, reported after taking advice from two foreign scientists. Both agreed that Ferriz Mas's work was "substantially more important" than that of the appointed candidate.

Despite this, Ferriz Mas's claim was rejected because the first part of the appointment process depended on the match between the position's 'teaching profile' and the research and teaching programme proposed by the candidates. The appeal panel acknowledged that the appointment board "should have operated with a higher diligence, as the 'fit' to the teaching profile must be clearly stated in preliminary information, as well as in the reports of the first exam".

The panel said it lacked the knowledge to judge how much the need to meet this 'teaching profile' should take precedence over the quality of prior research and teaching.

The appointment process had already been questioned by the third candidate for the post, Fernando Atrio Barandela, associate professor of theoretical physics at the University of Salamanca. He was also given three points in the first exam, following which he withdrew voluntarily.

Atrio Barandela asked one member of the appointment board the reason for his score, and says he was told it was not intended to reflect the relative merits of the candidates, but rather the committee's preferences.

A year later, Ferriz Mas applied for another post, an assistant professorship in the theoretical physics group, with an astrophysics teaching profile, at the university's Faculty of Sciences. The post involved instruction in using telescopes, but was given to a chemist.

Again Ferriz Mas appealed. This time the appeal panel, again chaired by Gómez de la Torre, accepted that the person appointed had a worse fit to the teaching profile than Ferriz Mas — but had substantially better research and teaching experience.

Ferriz Mas says that this second decision confirms that the local candidate was the predetermined choice for each post, and that there is often an unspoken agreement among the members of appointment boards.

In such cases, he argues, the deciding third voice seals a pact where board members return the favour in the future. He says that committee members have total impunity.

Many Spanish researchers are critical of the process. Benjamin Montesinos, director of the laboratory of space astrophysics and fundamental physics, an 'associated unit' of the Institute of Astrophysics of Andalusia (Higher Council of Scientific Research), says that a smokescreen of complex arguments is often used to justify appointing an internal candidate to a post.

He argues that examiners who assess applicants to jobs in universities should have no link with the department concerned.

Luis F. Rull, professor of physics at the University of Seville, says the argument used against Ferriz Mas — that fluid dynamics is a different discipline to atmospheric dynamics and thermodynamics — is false. Rull calls for common standards and wants a public ranking of disciplines, perhaps based on publication record, impact factor and citations.

Juan J. Manfredi, professor of mathematics at the University of Pittsburgh, says that many qualifications are used by appointment boards to disqualify candidates who may be better than local candidates.

He says that some positions define a teaching profile (instead of area of knowledge) so closely that only one candidate can meet the criteria. This process, he argues, goes directly against the cross-fertilization that research requires.

Xavier Bosch

... as new posts created in academic reforms

[MADRID] The Spanish government announced last week that it plans to introduce a new university position, based on a four-year contract, with the same responsibilities and salaries as existing tenured positions.

The new contracts form part of a set of university reforms to be debated in parliament next month. Also included is a proposal to reduce the number of local

university representatives on five-member appointments committees from two to one (see main story).

The government hopes that both moves, which have been approved by the secretary of state for universities, Manuel Jesús González, will increase the employment prospects for well qualified PhDs. They stress that winning one of the new teaching contracts

will depend on an independent national agency evaluating a candidate's research experience.

It says that the proposed changes to the legal framework governing universities — whose funding and administration is the responsibility of individual provinces — will increase the rigour and openness of the selection process and raise teaching standards.