

Germany's 'junior professor' fails to germinate

Few would disagree that reform in Germany's higher-education system is overdue. The historic institution of the *Habilitation*, in essence a second thesis that forms the prerequisite to qualify for a tenured professorship, has worked well in the past; it is arguably still of particular value in the arts, where there is a less direct relationship between academic achievement and publication record than in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, the system has several drawbacks. The *Habilitation* often generates a dependency relationship to a single mentoring full professor. This tends to dampen academic freedom, although how far depends on the individual circumstances and the policies of the host institution. The *Habilitation* also adds a significant extra work burden on the budding academic with no clear educational or academic benefit at a crucial time in their career. The result is that German academics — already significantly older than their international peers at the PhD level — reach tenured professorship at an even less competitive age. So does *Habilitation* provide for a more thorough mode of academic selection? It is true that a component of this qualification is an assessment of teaching ability, all too often disregarded in tenure-track assessments. However, local opinion can dominate *Habilitation* decisions. It is questionable if the *magnum opus* of a *Habilitation* thesis is really advantageous, given successful selection procedures in other countries on the sole basis of independent juries and bibliometric assessment.

A system of *Habilitation* has only survived in a handful of central and eastern European countries, and it does not readily translate into an international context. Science is very much a global enterprise and everyone vastly benefits from the free exchange facilitated by the present lack of political constraints and language multiplicity. This culture of a free flow of ideas is dependent on a free exchange of personnel. The requirement for a *Habilitation* can make it less desirable for foreign academics to work in Germany, and equally it may discourage Germans from acquiring international experience which may add yet more years to the achievement of the holy grail of a tenured professorship. Realizing these disadvantages, academic institutions sometimes award this qualification as a matter of formality in cases where it would discourage desirable international applicants. This creates an uncomfortable two-tier system where German academics may be forgiven for feeling that they are held to a higher burden of proof of qualification.

The Anglo-American system of tenure-track positions — which ideally provide a graded gain of research independence concomitantly with the accumulation of proof of research qualification on the basis of publication record — is demonstrably successful. Importantly, it is already employed by a significant fraction of countries and it seems to be the system that most easily translates trans-nationally; this should be a major criterion in the formulation of any modern science policy.

The German government has been grappling with the widespread calls for reform for several years. On the one hand, it has tried to 're-eliticise' the German academic environment. The rather misguided initial notion of launching new 'elite universities' to take on the historical centres of excellence, such as Heidelberg, Tübingen and Munich, has been supplanted by the laudable plan to inject an additional € 50m (£33.5m) annual booster fund into up to 10 'elite' universities selected in open competition (*Nature* 430, 283; 2004, *Nature* 427, 477 2004 and *Nature* 427, 271 2004). Alas, the financial windfall has been stalled as a result of a disagreement over who has authority over university policies (see below).

On the other hand, science minister Edelgard Bulmahn dreamt up the much debated 'junior professorship' — an independent temporary academic appointment — as an alternative to the traditional academic path. Some feel that it undermines the *Habilitation* further and represents a slightly underhand way for the federal government to phase out this qualification altogether. Others see it as not going far enough. This is certainly true: the explicit focus on independent research is most important and laudable; however, it is questionable how this can be achieved with the modest start-up money of € 60,000 (£40,000) earmarked by the government. Furthermore, the programme is limited to six years — it is not 'tenure track'. Entering into this career path without a *Habilitation* may leave many a researcher stranded thereafter. As a result, the majority of current 'junior professors' are still working on their *Habilitation* 'on the side' — even though the stated goal of the junior professorship is to provide an alternative to it. Finally, even if these limitations were to be ironed out, the 'junior professor' again represents potentially a two-tier system, where researchers in the old system may well feel disadvantaged. It is clear that the current number of around 600 'junior professors' falls far short of the tenfold higher numbers publicized by the government, and this is probably reflective of a limited support for the programme among young researchers.

The 'junior professorship' has unfortunately become a pawn in the tug of war between the 16 *Länder* (states) and the federal government. The German constitutional court recently ruled, albeit with a relatively narrow vote (with three of eight judges dissenting), that the position of 'junior professorship' is unconstitutional, as it represents an undue level of federal government influence over matters under the authority of the *Länder* (*Nature* 430, 599; 2004). This is most unfortunate, as it has sent the clear message that university policy is to be determined at the level of the 16 *Länder*. It is implausible to expect the overdue reforms that will be essential to secure the international competitiveness of German science in the long term at the level of local government. Nevertheless, it was the right decision for the wrong reasons. The 'junior professorship' is essentially unrealistic in its present incarnation: it goes in the right direction and it has laudable goals. However, the 'junior professorship' represents at best a half-baked attempt at reform — the victims of such policies will be the scientists pinning their careers on it. Germany should move to harmonize its academic system to international standards, but it would be wrong to rejoice at this court ruling, which has essentially made reform in Germany less, not more, probable.