

# naturejobs

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**T**he decline in the number of young junior faculty members at US universities could make it difficult to fill leadership positions in the future, according to a study by the American Council on Education. Just 3% of tenure-track faculty members at institutions that run full undergraduate courses are aged 34 or younger, so finding experienced people to be chairs, deans and university presidents will be difficult in the next generation, according to the council's report, *Too many Rungs on the Ladder? Faculty Demographics and the Future Leadership of Higher Education*.

Higher education has been affected by three main issues. First, faculty members are now generally older than they were when mandatory retirement was abolished in 1994, and are reluctant to retire. Second, universities rely more on part-time and non-tenure-track positions. And third, students are completing their doctorates later in life. The trend towards more and longer postdoc courses means that people have less time to gain the experience needed to advance into leadership positions.

The situation has both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, young faculty will have less competition and more positions available when they finally manage to move through the ranks. On the other hand, they might not have the chance to do so until they reach retirement age. So, a professor who is currently 45 years old could well still have the chance to become a dean — or even a university president — but perhaps not until he or she reaches the age of 70.

There are no easy solutions. Universities are unlikely to force ageing faculty off the top rung of the ladder or to create new positions for young professors. However, they may be forced to remove some rungs from the ladder — or else place some closer together, so that today's junior faculty members can progress from chair to dean more quickly. Perhaps today's administration can help mentor tomorrow's university leaders — or, at least, convince them that such positions are worth the wait.

**Paul Smaglik moderates the Naturejobs career forum on Nature Networks.**

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