

Academic labour markets in Europe vary widely in openness and job security

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Having examined the organisation of Europe's academic labour markets, [Alexandre Afonso](#) outlines the main differences between countries across the continent. There is greatest variance in two particular areas: the extent to which academic labour markets are open to outsiders, and the job security they provide for recent PhD graduates. This has obvious consequences for the mobility of academics across Europe and the progression of early career researchers.



In February this year, Stefania Giannini, the Italian Minister for Education and Research, wrote a Facebook [post](#) to congratulate the 30 Italian researchers that had received a [Consolidator Grant](#) from the European Research Council worth up to €2million. What she failed to mention, however, was that 17 of these grants were awarded to Italian researchers working abroad. Roberta d'Alessandro, a Professor of Linguistics at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and one of the Italian recipients of the prestigious award, wrote a reply to Giannini that was shared 15,000 times on the social media platform, and [widely reported in Italian media](#). In her reply, she told the minister not to claim her success because it had little to do with Italian universities. After she had gone abroad to pursue a successful academic career, she had been unable to come back. Instead, Italian academia had hired "insiders" that stood no chance of ever receiving this award. She would use the award to do research in the Netherlands, where she had been able to gain a professorship at the age of 33. In Italy, of 12,878 full professors [only 36 were younger than 40](#), and only two were younger than 35.

This example is telling of the wide differences in the organisation of academic labour markets in Europe, notably between countries where access to jobs and promotion is mostly closed to outsiders and draws primarily on seniority (Italy, Spain), and those that are open to foreign academics and where promotion is more based on performance (the Netherlands, the UK).

In a recent [article](#), I outline the main differences in the organisation of academic labour markets in Europe with an emphasis on two dimensions: the extent to which they are open to outsiders, and the job security they provide for recent PhD graduates. I differentiate between four types of academic job markets:

1. open markets with high security (e.g. the UK, Netherlands, Scandinavia)
2. closed markets with (potential) high security (e.g. France, Spain, Italy)
3. open markets with low security (e.g. Switzerland)
4. closed markets with low security (e.g. Germany).



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The first type is the one criticised above. It is *closed and relatively secure*, and found in countries such as Italy, Spain or France. In these countries, access to the academic job market is strongly restricted for outsiders. This doesn't necessarily mean people of another nationality, but certainly people who obtained their doctorate in another country. Barriers to entry can take two forms. First, they can be formal, such as administrative requirements that applicants must comply with to be allowed to apply for positions. In France, in a number of disciplines, applicants need, for instance, to be "qualified" by a jury of French academics to determine whether they are a suitable for an academic position. This takes place even before open positions are advertised. Application materials need to be translated in French to prove that candidates can teach in the country. Spain has a similar centralised qualification process which may exclude outsiders not aware of the specifics of administrative recruitment.

The second barrier is informal, and is mainly related to local procedures of recruitment that tend to favour local candidates over outsiders with potentially better research profiles. In France, research has shown that local applicants are [18 times](#) more likely to obtain a position than external applicants. In Spain, [73% of all faculty obtained their PhD at the university where they are appointed](#), and 95% of professors obtaining new positions already had a position in the same institution. Even more strikingly, research has found an astonishing [clustering of the same last names in Italian university departments](#), indicating widespread recruitment of people from the same family. A [National Bureau of Economic Research paper](#) reports that during the mandate of the former chancellor (*rettore*) of the University of Bari, "two of his sons, one daughter, the wife, and a son-in-law were hired or promoted, all in his own department". Recently, however, the Italian government has [decided](#) to fund 500 professors that would be selected by independent commissions headed by foreign academics rather than local universities to bypass these dynamics.

The second type is the one found in the UK, the Netherlands and parts of Scandinavia, where the market is relatively *open to outsiders and offers reasonable levels of job security* for academics right after their doctorate. We do not know how Brexit will impact the academic landscape in Britain, but so far British universities have relied extensively on academics trained abroad without the widespread local patterns of recruitment observed elsewhere. One reason for this, besides the obvious factor of language, is that the system of financial incentives makes it costly to recruit non-competitive local candidates because the income of universities depends at least partly on the academic output of their researchers. Besides, these countries offer permanent positions to recent PhD graduates – lectureships or assistant professorships – while this occurrence is rare in other countries, such as Germany. In 2013–2014, 64% of British academics were employed on open-ended contracts, while in Germany, [two thirds of academic staff](#) were on fixed-term contracts.

Germany is an example of the third type, where the academic job market is both *closed and insecure*. For a long time, applicants needed to possess an habilitation – basically a second PhD – to qualify for professor positions. Even if this requirement has been softened recently, and the academic job market has become more international, it acted for a long time as a *de facto* barrier to entry similar to the national qualification procedures in France or Spain. The most striking characteristic of this type of labour market, however, is the virtual absence of permanent positions for early career researchers. In 1917, nearly a century ago, sociologist [Max Weber wrote](#) that:

“It is extremely hazardous for a young scholar without funds to expose himself to the conditions of the academic career. He must be able to endure this condition for at least a number of years without knowing whether he will have the opportunity to move into a position which pays well enough for maintenance.”

In many respects, this precarity for early career scholars is still a defining feature of the German academic job market. It is not [uncommon](#) for German academics to work on fixed-term contracts under the direction of a professor well into their forties, and the ‘Mittelbau’ (mid-level staff) constitutes the largest part of academic staff. German universities have traditionally displayed a strongly pyramidal structure organised around professors leading academic chairs composed of assistants, postdocs and even mid-career scholars, with a large level of autonomy. With no proper tenure-track system, promotion is only usually possible by obtaining a permanent position at another university.

Switzerland, an example of the fourth type, displays a variation of this system, with a high level of *job insecurity for entrants, but tends to be much more open*. For instance, about half of all academics employed in Swiss higher education are foreign. A distinctiveness of the Swiss market is the high level of wages in comparative perspective (Figure 1). In these countries, reforms have been undertaken to improve job security for early career researchers, but so far the type of jobs created, such assistant professorships (*juniorprofessuren*) have often failed to provide real paths to career progression as many are fixed-term as well.

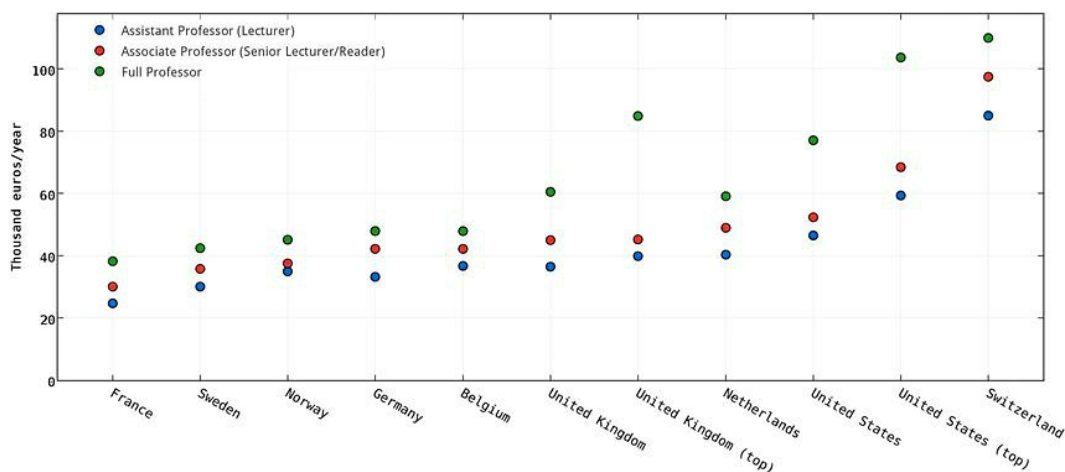


Figure 1: Academic wages in selected countries, 2015. Source of data: [Beloning van wetenschappelijk personeel in internationaal perspectief](#).

While there is some level of convergence across countries, the wide differences in opportunities and openness across European countries feed the mobility of researchers in Europe, notably from seniority-driven, closed systems where career progression is slow, to open systems where personal connections matter less. The mobility of

researchers also takes place from countries with low job security to those where permanent jobs are available for young academics. The largest recipient of these flows so far has naturally been the UK, and we don't know how the new immigration rules that will be applied post-Brexit will change this situation.

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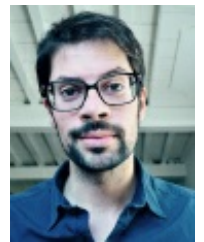
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