



LIP SERVICE?

About researcher recruitment in academia

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Teachers and Researchers

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Authors: Anna Lundgren, Git Claesson Pipping och Karin Åmossa

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Lip service? About researcher recruitment in academia (short version)

This article is about the processes that lead to employment within Swedish academic life and is an abbreviated version of “Lip Service? About recruitment processes in academia” (SULF 2018). Unlike the longer report, this version focuses on the employment of researchers.

The Government's research goal is for Sweden to be one of the world's leading research countries. Methods of recruiting of state-employed researchers are protected by the Constitution. In order for recruitment to be carried out in a high-quality, effective manner, it is important that the best suited people get the jobs, based on their skills and not because they happen to have the right contacts. As a trade union, we see it as our task to study whether existing legislation and regulations are complied with, not least for quality reasons but also to ensure that people do not suffer because of the ambiguity of what goes on while pursuing an academic career.

Jobs as researchers in the academic world must be offered to those who are best suited. Government instructions stipulate that skill should be the first priority. By reviewing employment processes, we have come to the conclusion that there are doubts about whether higher education institutions actually comply with the law. It is not clear that recruitment processes in academia comply with government requirements for merits and skills in the appointment of government employees.

It is well known that established universities recruit mainly from among their own ranks, but the measurement usually applied is whether researchers have taken their doctorate at the same university. This article goes deeper and explores specific recruitment processes. Our purpose was to investigate how the processes are implemented, not whether the right or wrong person got the job.

The report shows that researcher positions in the academic world are rarely filled by applicants who are not already active at the same university, that jobs advertised are in many cases applied for by extremely few people, and that several appointments were made before the final application date or within a very short period of time afterwards.

This study is limited to three faculties at three different universities: Lund University, Faculty of Engineering (LTH), the Faculty of Social Sciences at Stockholm University (SamFakSU) and the Faculty of Medicine at Uppsala University (MedFakUU).

- 56% of their jobs were advertised for less than three weeks, 16% of their jobs were advertised for less than one week.
- 69% of the ads generated fewer than 5 applicants, 41% only a single applicant.
- 64% of the positions were filled within 20 days of the final application date. 8% were filled before the deadline.
- 72% of the positions were filled by internal applicants.

The fact that the right recruitment is made is vital for several reasons. It is about the quality of operations being the highest possible and this will only come to pass if the individuals who are most competent for the job know that they can apply, have sufficient time to apply and know that they have as good a chance as internal candidates to get the job. Good processes are also a prerequisite for academic mobility between universities, nationally and internationally, and between universities and the surrounding community. Legal security, and in particular the certainty that the process

can in no way be suspected of being pre-determined, are vital both to attracting competent applicants and creating confidence in the public sector.

Problem description and issues

If calls for applicants are designed to suit only one person, why is this a problem? There are several answers. There are legal and democratic problems as this opens up to nepotism and diminishes confidence in the public system. Consequently, the recruitment of staff by the state is regulated in the form of government instructions. If government institutions do not apply legally sound and transparent criteria for their recruitment, the public sector is undermined. This is serious enough in itself.

Nepotism must also be counteracted to guarantee the highest possible quality in operations. Nepotism can form a double barrier as it makes the workplace less attractive to qualified applicants. If nepotism is known to prevail, it risks scaring off applicants who know they have no chance because the job is reserved for someone else. This makes the research and university teacher career less attractive to competent people who can easily find good jobs outside the academic world.

It is also a problem of quality. One important prerequisite for high levels of quality and equal opportunities in academia is that all appointments are made via a legally secure, transparent process. The thinking behind this approach is that science is developed by experts arguing against each other. For arguments to be tested, it is necessary that employees are reasonably secure in their employment, that they cannot be punished if they contradict more senior colleagues – it is the scientific argument that must be evaluated. An unjustifiably high proportion of fixed-term employment and insecure, opaque recruitment processes are a direct obstacle to the job security that is essential for this process to take place.

The proportion of fixed-term employment in the academic world is way above other sectors in the labour market. Of graduate PhDs who were employed as researchers, as many as 63% were employed on a fixed-term contract in 2018.¹ Being a fixed-term contract employee, often on appointments of one year or less, entails difficulties in planning long-term operations, creating continuity in research and building good work and research environments that are capable of laying the foundation for creativity and productivity.²

Mobility will also suffer if employment processes are not successful. There must be enough time to discover and apply for vacancies, and they must be sufficiently broadly-specified for many researchers to apply. If higher education institutions apply systems to recruit already-known individuals, it will be very difficult for competent applicants from other sectors, other countries or other higher education institutions to gain entry.

In the case of state higher education institutions, there are also legal requirements for legal security and transparency, whether the job is permanent or fixed-term. Formal requirements for how employment should be carried out within the state can be found in the government instructions, the Public Employment Act and the Employment

¹ UKÄ statistics UF 23 SM 1901. The researcher group includes postdocs, assistant professors, research assistants and other research/teaching personnel with PhDs.

² See e.g. Per Osbeck and Karin Warfvinge, "Om tidsbegränsade anställningar vid Lunds universitet: En jämställdhetsfråga" SULF-Lund 2003, Page 2.

Ordinance. This means that legally insecure employment procedures are not only inappropriate for quality reasons but also violate government regulations.

The problem of questionable employment processes is also well-known internationally. According to European agreements, calls for recruitment of researchers should give a broad description of the knowledge and skills required, and they should not be so specialised that qualified applicants refrain from applying.³ Departments should apply fair and transparent processes in the recruitment of personnel.⁴

We wish to emphasise that this report is not intended to identify any individuals who have been employed on shaky grounds. The focus of this study is on the employment processes and management of higher education institutions.

Results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to make a tentative survey of calls for applicants and recruitment processes at some university departments to discover the extent to which the universities comply with the legal requirements for merit and skill and whether employment in the academic world is advertised and appointed fairly, openly and broadly-based. We also wished to create a basis for discussion, further questions and further investigation. Our hope is that by reviewing employment processes, we will contribute to more higher education institutions in the future doing right from the start. It would also mean a lower proportion of fixed-term jobs, since the department would have greater confidence in the fact that they were employing the right person for the job, which would lead to less administration overall.

Going through an entire recruitment process every six months is also an administrative burden that most organisations would prefer to avoid. A strong contributing reason for higher education institutions not conducting thorough recruitment processes may be the high proportion of fixed-term employees among research and teaching staff.

Suspected rigged calls for applicants are appealed relatively rarely. This is probably due to the fact that it is often known in the scientific circle that the position is intended for a particular candidate and that others do not wish to jeopardise their future opportunities for employment by getting a name as a troublemaker.

Our basic assumption in this study has been that it is reasonable to assume that there are more candidates working outside a certain faculty than inside it.

The three faculties chosen are geographically located so that there are other universities and colleges performing similar operations in their immediate vicinity. Within a short distance, MedFakUU has the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Karolinska Institutet and Stockholm University, all of which conduct research and educate doctoral candidates in overlapping areas. Reasonably, for every job advertised on MedFakUU there should be qualified applicants from the other universities. SamFakSU similarly has Uppsala University, Stockholm School of Economics, Södertörn University and Mälardalen University, who conduct related activities. LTH does not have far to the Technical University of Denmark.

If the basic assumption that there are many competent people in the geographical area is correct, then it should be easy for these higher education institutions to generate a

³ The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, European Commission 2005.

⁴ European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015.

large selection of qualified applicants for each position. In addition, if the recruitment culture at the higher education institution, as it should, extends beyond the country's borders and across to other social sectors, the range of applicants should be even greater.

In this survey we have asked four questions:

- How many days are jobs advertised?
- How many applicants has each advertised job generated?
- How long do assessment and selection take?
- How common is it that jobs are filled by internal applicants?

How many days are jobs advertised?

Table 1. %age of positions advertised for less than 21 days. %age of all employment in the relevant category.

| | LTH | SamFakSU | MedFakUU |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|
| Job as researcher or postdoc | 88% | 33% | 70% |

A large proportion of jobs at LTH (88%) and MedFakUU (70%) were advertised for less than three weeks.

There are also a number of very short call dates. All faculties announced fixed-term appointments using a shorter application period than one week. SamFakSU clearly stands out on this issue. Only one-third of jobs were advertised for less than three weeks.

How many applicants has each job advertised generated?

Table 2. Percentage of advertised positions applied for by four people or fewer, divided by researchers and teachers. %age of all jobs in relevant category.

| | LTH | SamFakSU | MedFakUU |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|
| Job as researcher or postdoc | 88% | 28% | 59% |

The faculty - LTH - which had the highest proportion of short call times also has the highest proportion of jobs applied for by just one person, 41%. In all the material gathered, less than one-third of the jobs were applied for by five people or more.

A short application period gives fewer applications than a longer time span. If the purpose of the ad is to employ a specific, already-known person, there is no reason for the university to allow the application time to be long enough for many people to have time to apply for the job.

This may be the reason for the extremely brief window of opportunity for application to many of these jobs.

How long do assessment and selection take?

Table 3. Percentage of advertised positions filled within 21 days of final application date.⁵ Employment as a researcher/postdoctoral researcher. %age of all positions in the relevant category.

| | LTH | SamFakSU | MedFakUU |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|
| Job as researcher or postdoc | 80% | 39% | 52% |

Naturally the processing time also reflects the faculty's views on employment. When the processing takes place very quickly, it is obvious that the job has been advertised in order to employ a specific applicant.

It can be said, of course, that a longer period does not necessarily result in more legally secure or accurate processing, but it should be obvious that these truncated processing times indicate that the call was intended for the applicant appointed or at least that not all applicants were examined very carefully.

How common is it that jobs are filled by internal applicants?

Internal applicants are defined as:

- The person currently works at the same faculty as the recruitment applies to, even if it is at another department or research centre.
- According to his/her CV, the person does not work at the department but provides an email address at the department as contact information.
- The person has published his/her thesis or worked at the department within two years of the job ad.

Table 4. Percentage of individuals employed who are internal applicants, by position. %age of all employment in the relevant category.

| | LTH | SamFakSU | MedFakUU |
|------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|
| Job as researcher or postdoc | 77% | 50% | 86% |

The results at the detail level differ somewhat between the three faculties. However, the pattern is clear when examining the aggregate level: 72% of researchers employed are internal candidates. There are therefore reasons to question whether employment processes really are open or whether they are designed to give internal candidates the advantage.

⁵ Including those appointed before final application date and where date of employment decision is totally absent.

Conclusions

Adding up the answers to the four questions, the picture shows that a typical job is advertised for a short period of time, applied for by very few, processed quickly and filled by an internal candidate. It is difficult to ignore the risk that processes are often rigged, that is, they are intended for a particular candidate from the very start.

Our investigation indicates that a large proportion of the calls for applicants may be rigged for pre-determined candidates. But it really does not matter if 10%, 25% or 75% of the jobs are rigged. Every rigged job is a problem:

- From a legal perspective: they do not meet the core principles of the Swedish state administration, that is, the requirement that all government appointments must be in open competition and be filled by the most suitable candidate.
- From an economic perspective: it is not guaranteed that the taxpayers will get the best possible return on their tax funding.
- From a quality perspective: the development of science requires that researchers dare to question one another, even within groups of workmates, and lack of job security makes this questioning impossible.

The basic reason for designing an employment process so that only one person can be considered is, of course, that you are convinced that this person is best suited for the job. However, if that belief is genuine then it should not be necessary to manipulate the system. If it were the case, he/she should be able to get the job in competition.

Another explanation for the large proportion of internally-filled positions may be the same explanation that is sometimes given by experts who, in research funding situations, more often recommend applicants with whom they have different forms of connections or contacts. Research on employment processes has suggested that people tend to recognise qualities in others that they themselves think they have.

The reason the legislation so clearly stipulates that the state will employ the most suitable candidate is about achieving the highest quality and efficiency. In science, it is especially important to ensure that the person employed for the long term is the most suitable. Science grows because each researcher critically reviews past research and goes their own way. But if you, as a new graduate, know that your future in research depends on keeping in with the right people, will you contradict them?

SULF: proposed measures

It is clear that something must be done to secure employment processes in the academic world. The measures we propose aim to support government requirements for merit and skill as the basis of government appointments.

The universities must:

- Ensure more long-term budget and operational planning processes.
- Create routines that make rigged calls for applicants impossible.
- Ensure that they establish and comply with clear, transparent and legally secure processes for recruiting staff as stated in their internal quality assurance systems.
- The government must:
- Increase the proportion of direct government funding to higher education institutions in order to create better preconditions for long-term planning of budgets and staff.
- Task the Swedish Higher Education Authority to verify that university departments, via supervision or within the framework of their quality assurance systems, apply transparent and legally secure employment processes.

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Legislation and Ordinances

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Government Instructions

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