

Conflicting Opinions on the Success of the “Junior Professorship” (July 13, 2006)

Abstract

In this newspaper article, a journalist sums up the controversial debate sparked by a study conducted by the Center for Higher Education Development [*Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung* or CHE] on the new junior professorship. Whereas conservative universities rejected the junior professorship, progressive institutions of higher learning embraced it. So far, however, it hasn't been able to completely replace the second dissertation [*Habilitation*] as a qualification for a professorship in the humanities.

Source

A Final Farewell

It was supposed to change the antiquated procedure for making professorial appointments to universities. Now the Junior Professorship appears doomed.

The young academic immediately knew what it was about. “Oh,” she said, “You want to write an obituary.” More precisely: an obituary for the Junior Professorship. And then it came pouring out of her: that most junior professors feel desperately insecure. That most of them are also working on their second dissertations [*Habilitationen*].^[1] That most of them would never recommend that anyone become a junior professor. “Junior professorships,” she concluded, “are over and done with.”

This young researcher didn't want her name to appear in the newspaper – because she is expressing a truth that is painful for many young academics and devastating for higher education. The junior professorship threatens to die an early death. Only a good four years after its inception, on February 23, 2002, one of the best ideas in recent higher education policy is on the verge of failure.

The junior professorship was supposed to revolutionize academic career paths in Germany. According to the plans of former education minister Edelgard Bulmahn, young researchers were supposed to be able to pursue independent teaching and research when they were still in their early thirties, rather than work underneath a full professor and not become independent until their early forties. Junior professors were supposed to have responsibilities previously reserved for professors: they were to give lectures, conduct exams, secure their own research funding, and have assistants work for them. Dorothea Nolde, a junior professor for early modern history at the University of Bremen, for example, said, “I have considerably more leeway in this position than I would as an assistant.”

The Number of Positions has Hardly Increased in Two Years

The idea is impressive but has been thwarted by reality: Dorothea Nolde has remained a major exception. According to a (still) unpublished study conducted by the Center for Higher Education Development [*Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung* or CHE], which is funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Rectors' Conference [*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz* or HRK], barely 1,000 junior professorships have been announced since 2002. Particularly dramatic is the fact that the number of junior professorships has hardly increased in the last two years; there were already between 800 and 930 (depending on the count) back in 2004. New positions were supported with special federal subsidies until the end of 2004. After this funding source dried up, an average of only ten new positions have been announced per month. The German Federal Ministry of Education originally aimed for a total of 6,000

junior professors.” In its response to a Minor Interpellation [*Kleine Anfrage*] introduced in the Bundestag by the Left party, it declared that goal to be “obsolete.” The junior professorship – discontinued due to lack of demand.

“One certainly cannot speak of a successful model,” said Bernhard Kempen, president of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers [*Deutscher Hochschulverband* or DHV]. “The junior professorship did not catch on,” regretted Katharina Landfester, former spokeswoman of the Young Academy, an association of scientists and scholars, and a consistent advocate of the new title. “Junior professors are caught between a rock and a hard place,” reported Peter Hommelhoff, vice chancellor of the University of Heidelberg. And Reinhardt Lutz, chancellor of the University of Bonn and one of the harshest critics of the new model, even said: “If junior professorships weren’t a stillborn venture from the very outset, they could end up becoming one now.”

The reality of many institutions of higher education does not include any junior professors at all. Bonn, for example, does not have a single young professor in its ranks, because the university – as its chancellor said – did not allow itself to “become infected by the junior professor virus.” In Heidelberg, the new model met with such “pronounced reservations in the various departments,” as Vice Chancellor Hommelhoff explained, that the university first had to create “clarity with a new model.” There, the junior professorship is only one of three ways to become a full professor – in addition to becoming the leader of a group of young researchers or writing a *Habilitation*. The situation is similar at other universities.

There are, of course, exceptions: the universities in Oldenburg, Göttingen, Bochum, and Frankfurt am Main, for example, and, first and foremost, Berlin’s Humboldt University (HU). It aims to hire junior professors in a one-to-four ratio to professors. Presently there are fifty young professors teaching at the HU. “It is a sensible and necessary model,” said Vice-president Hans Jürgen Prömel, “even if interest has flagged a bit.” The HU introduced an exemplary tenure track in May. Whoever achieves a great deal and gets positive evaluations can be placed on a tenure track by the university. If a professorship opens up within five years after a young academic’s junior professorship runs out, then the university can give the position to him or her without posting it first. No other German university has made such an effort on behalf of young professors. The effort has paid off; nine former Humboldt junior professors have been appointed to full professorships. An outstanding ratio.

Tenure track positions for junior professors remain an exception according to the CHE study – despite the fact that three-quarters of university administrators interviewed by the Center for Higher Education Development assessed the quality of the junior professors as high. One-quarter quibbled. Most of the interim evaluations were positive, but the unquestionably high quality of the young professors has not led to new positions or increased demand for one simple reason: at most universities, the classic postdoctoral lecturers and junior professors have to compete against each other. “This competition is wise,” said DHV president Bernhard Kempen.

This may be true. But it is also an unfair battle, since, in the end, the junior professors have a serious competitive disadvantage: not only do they have to teach, often more than the postdoctoral lecturers do, but they also have to conduct exams and frequently also have to participate in the academic self-administration. In appointment decisions, however, the most important criterion is research achievements. And the young academics have little time to do good research. “You can’t make research the main criterion,” said Bremen’s junior professor Dorothea Nolde. Her colleague Dagmar Borchers is also familiar with the daily struggle: “You get very preoccupied with not getting lost in the daily routine.” Florian Buch of the CHE said, “Junior professors have to do a lot of things that don’t add to their list of publications.”

Many also Complete their Second Dissertation, Just in Case

A look at the statistics of the German Research Foundation [*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* or DFG] leaves a mixed impression. Whereas young professors in the natural and life sciences are very successful in applying for funds for their research projects, academics in the humanities, social sciences, and engineering fare far below average. “The natural and life sciences are much further along and allow more latitude in career paths,” said Beate Scholz of the DFG. In many academic departments, especially the humanities and social sciences, the exam following the publication of the *Habilitation* is still a decisive prerequisite for the receipt of a professorial appointment. For this reason, many young academics work on their *Habilitation* parallel to their primary job as a junior professor. “That is ridiculous on the face of it but makes a lot of sense in individual cases,” said historian Tassilo Schmitt.

As can be expected, completing a second dissertation on the side takes longer than doing it the standard way. This could also be one reason for the decrease in the number of *Habilitationen* in 2005. The Federal Office of Statistics initially listed the junior professorship as the reason. When asked about it, the office responded: “We will really only be able to say something definitive in a few years.” Also, only a minority of university administrators interviewed by the CHE believed that the *Habilitation* is losing significance – a vast majority felt that subject-specific procedures have gained greater acceptance.

Small wonder the mood among the junior professors is not as euphoric as it was a few years ago. “I thought it would enjoy greater acceptance,” said Lars Frommann, a young professor in Clausthal and, as head of the Association of Friends of the Junior Professor, a decided lobbyist for the new model. Frommann himself faced obstacles in Clausthal; he had “internal problems finding acceptance” and was not invited to department meetings. Now he is leaving Clausthal, because he received a professorial appointment at the Zwickau Polytechnic. Frommann is in a fortunate situation. He estimates that only about one-third of young academics receive a tenured position. The rest run the risk of being sent into unemployment by their alma mater. “A lot of people will fall through the cracks,” said Frommann. “There simply aren’t enough jobs.”

One reason for the great reservations against the junior professorship is that Edelgard Bulmahn tried to push her idea through with brute force in order to get rid of the *Habilitation* requirement. She landed, as Bavarian science and research minister Thomas Goppel put it at the time, “on her butt” before the Federal Constitutional Court. The judges considered Bulmahn’s approach competence piracy. They said that education policy is the jurisdiction of the federal states; the federal government had no say in the matter. Bulmahn held fast to her commitment to the young academics; today she still sees her brainchild as a “successful measure” that “is no longer seriously questioned” at universities.

Yet hardly any encouraging signals for young professors are coming from the Federal Education Ministry under the leadership of CDU minister Annette Schavan. Ministerial spokesperson Florian Frank characterized the junior professorship as an instrument with which to forge talent, but he stoically referred to talks with the federal states – that is not what a clear commitment to the new model sounds like. “The ministry hasn’t taken a stance yet,” lamented expert Tassilo Schmitt. “The junior professors feel abandoned.” Annette Knaut, president of Thesis, an association of doctoral candidates, complained that “the federal government’s response is very cautious.” And Petra Sitte, education expert for the Left party in the Bundestag, said, “The ministry wants to wait and see.”

The federal government is laying low, most universities are passive, and the junior professors are uncertain. Lars Frommann of the Association of Friends of the Junior Professor summed it up realistically: “I’d do it over again,” he said, having just received a professorial appointment, “but I don’t know if I would recommend that anyone become a junior professor.”

NOTES

[1] The traditional route to a professorship in Germany is to write a second dissertation, called a

Habilitation. The *Habilitation* is an additional postdoctoral qualification required of university professors – eds.

Source: Manuel J. Hartung, “Ein letzter Gruß”, *Die Zeit*, July 13, 2006.

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