



# Assistant Professorships in Sweden — an Evaluation

A predictable and transparent career system that rewards high scientific quality is a prerequisite for Sweden to be a successful research nation. Unfortunately, the Swedish academic career system has been fragmented, featuring a wide variety of employment forms and types of positions for young researchers not only at the different higher education institutions (HEIs) but also at different faculties within the same institutions. A number of studies have investigated career paths and conditions of work for young researchers, and in 2017 a tenure-track system was formally established through the introduction of the assistant professor<sup>1</sup> position in the Higher Education Ordinance.<sup>2</sup> The Young Academy of Sweden believes that this is a key reform of the academic system, and we have therefore conducted a survey of how assistant professorships have been implemented at Swedish HEIs. We have analyzed data from the recruitment of 878 assistant professors or analogous positions before and after the 2017 reform, and have compiled a report on how this type of position is used and what advantages and disadvantages have been identified.

The overall picture is that assistant professorships are being used in a variety of ways at the university and university college faculties that responded to our questionnaire. Some faculties have put in place well-developed tenure-track systems, whereas others are just starting to do so. In the present report we present our findings from the perspective of the stated goals of the reform and current working conditions for junior researchers in Sweden. Our main conclusions are as follows:

- The majority of the faculties, especially in the fields of medicine, natural science, and technology, point out the shortened eligibility window for assistant professorships, now set at 5 years after PhD as opposed to 7 years in the previous version of the Higher Education Ordinance,<sup>3</sup> as problematic. In some areas this time limit is seen as too short to allow candidates to build up the track record necessary for adequate evaluation.
- The medical faculties highlight the difficulty of accumulating sufficient clinical experience within the framework of an assistant professor position, due to the fact that current regulations in the Higher Education Ordinance do not allow so-called combined assistant professorships including clinical work. This is also mentioned as a gender equality issue.

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<sup>1</sup> *Biträdande lektor*. Also referred to as Associate Senior Lecturer by the Swedish Council for Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> *Högskoleförordningen*. Unofficial English translation: <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Higher-Education-Ordinance/>

<sup>3</sup> In the previous version of the Higher Education Ordinance, the analogous position was “employment for acquisition of qualifications” (*anställning för meritering*), open to applicants with a PhD degree received at most 7 years ago. This position did not include the right to be tried for tenure.

- The financing of assistant professorships varies widely, from positions fully supported by direct government appropriations (*basanslag*) before and after promotion to associate professor,<sup>4</sup> to positions wholly dependent on external funding where there are no guarantees for paid research time after promotion.
- Several faculties, primarily in the humanities and social sciences, view assistant professorships as expensive positions since these often include much research time. These faculties also voice a concern for lock-in effects, both because faculty recruitment implies long-term commitments to specific research areas and because the promotion of assistant professors to permanent positions at the same institution reduces mobility at the level of associate professorships.
- The number of applicants per position fluctuates greatly between faculties and subject areas, from an average of 1 up to 67 applicants per position. Overall, the average number of applicants for an assistant professorship in Sweden is 15.
- Our analysis shows that the share of external applicants to assistant professorships is high. During the period before the above-mentioned reform, from 2012 to March 2018, approximately 70 % of the applicants are external, for the time after that the corresponding number is 78 %. The share of positions to which an external candidate was hired is significantly lower, namely 42 % for the period before and 49 % for the time after the reform. We find that internal candidates are more likely to be hired at faculties that on average have very few external applicants for positions.
- Women are over-represented among hired faculty when compared to the gender distribution among the applicants. At the same time, women are under-represented among applicants when compared to the gender distribution among recently graduated PhDs.
- The expected tenure rate is high. As many as 96 % of the assistant professors who applied for promotion during 2012–2018 were promoted to the rank of associate professor. The survey responses from the faculties clearly indicates that the actual selection happens during the recruitment of assistant professors, and that the intention is that a high share of assistant professors should be promoted to associate professor.

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<sup>4</sup> *Lektor*. Also referred to as senior lecturer by the Swedish Council for Higher Education.

# Conclusions of the Young Academy of Sweden

The Young Academy of Sweden believes that the recruitment of younger researchers is the most important means by which HEIs can improve the overall quality of research in Sweden.

The introduction of the position of assistant professor in the Higher Education Ordinance was a critical step towards the implementation of quality-driven recruitment processes. It is vital that HEIs now set long-term goals for the recruitment of younger, independent researchers and develop merit-based recruitment processes. We believe that this will lead to a lasting and sustainable increase in the quality of teaching and research in Sweden.

The Young Academy of Sweden is convinced that assistant professorships are a core step in a coherent approach to career progression. Employment opportunities at this level should be designed to attract the very best international candidates to Swedish HEIs. Additionally, the development of assistant professors should be accompanied by individualized support through mentoring, leadership training and active collegial support. In the final tenure review, the candidate should be evaluated against transparent, strict, and merit-based promotion criteria. The financing of a possible associate professorship after promotion should already have been secured at an earlier stage, and the conditions for funding of such a position should be communicated clearly to the candidate. By these means, the academic position of assistant professor can contribute to an increase in the quality of higher education in Sweden and boost our competitiveness as a research nation.

To further facilitate the use of assistant professorships at Swedish HEIs, the Young Academy of Sweden proposes the following changes to the Higher Education Ordinance:

1. The window of eligibility for assistant professorships should be extended from 5 to 7 years. Most faculties within the fields of science, technology, and medicine find that the current 5-year limit is too short and makes it difficult to recruit the best candidates. It also hampers mobility between institutions, countries, and sectors of society, and has a negative impact on gender equality.
2. The regulations should be clarified to allow the combination of assistant professorships with clinical work in hospitals. Medical faculties report that they cannot make full use of this type of position, since it is currently not possible for medical doctors and other healthcare personnel to combine their employment with an assistant professorship position.