

# The Case for Discipline-Specific Differentiation in Academic Promotion in Hungarian Higher Education

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## Abstract

*The relationship between academic promotion and a personal career path in Higher Education in Hungary is, unfortunately, very unclear. Although the regulations and related statutes often change, it is still not clearly defined how Institutes of Higher Education should make serious decisions regarding their personnel.*

*During the last 15 years, achieving the rank of Academic Doctor - awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) - has become critically important for the projected career path of a senior academic, and the purpose of this paper is to offer empirical evidence against the use of non-differentiated academic promotion policy and arguments for discipline-specific policy in Higher Education.*

*The anonymous biographical database of the University of Pécs reveals significant differences in the career paths of professors in different faculties. We found that the life-time earnings from their university posts of senior academics in their late career is closely related to the discipline in which they work. The difference between earnings in different disciplines may be as high as 39%, but this may also be countered by differing retirement practices among faculties - which is clearly not a normative approach.*

*One solution might be for universities to be given the responsibility to decide and publish the criteria necessary for any particular discipline to develop institutionally – and especially to make their own decisions on awarding professorships.*

## 1. Introduction

For university teachers, promotion should be predictable - based both on statutory regulations and on traditional Custom and Practice. This is a crucial precondition for the ability to plan an academic career. However, during the last 15 to 20 years in Hungary we have experienced that the relationship between academic promotion and personal career paths in Higher Education is quite incidental. It is not at all clear which considerations and criteria the decision-making institutions (faculties, universities, the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, and even central government) use to make serious decisions. The aim of our paper is to investigate some of the principle features and consequences of the Hungarian Higher Education system which significantly influence how individual careers can be planned.

## 2. Major features of Hungarian Higher Education

Following the Socialist regime, in the transition era, personal promotion in universities was still based on Soviet practice. The academic ranking scheme necessary for every position (somewhat simplified and in no way normative) was basically as follows:

1. Assistant Lecturer;
2. Senior Lecturer – for which the precondition for nomination was the degree of “university doctor” – “*doctor universitas*” (a post-graduate award but conferred simply at Faculty-level);
3. Associate Professor – for which the precondition was the degree of “Candidate of Sciences’ (CSc) - an old academic qualification predating the introduction of the Ph.D. degree and awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences);
4. Professor, for which the precondition was the degree of Doctor of Science (DSc) also awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The Higher Education Act. 80 of 1993 [1], adapted to prevailing national and international practice in respect of the autonomy of the universities, declared that the PhD should be the first and determinant stage of academic No status. The PhD degree can be gained in the doctoral schools of the universities and replaced titles such as “dr. univ” and “Candidate of Science”. A CSc degree obtained previously and ongoing

nominations for “Candidate of Science” are accepted as equivalent to the PhD degree. The appearance of the ‘habilitation’, its peculiar role and significance, created a mixed system which contained features of both domestic and foreign practice, at the same time significantly increasing the autonomy of the universities. The later changes in the legislation of Hungarian Higher Education (‘Higher Education Act CXXXIV of 2005’ [2], ‘Act CCIV of 2011 on ‘National Higher Education’[3]) declares that the grades of “Assistant Lecturer” and “Senior Lecturer” are strictly linked to specific phases of the Ph.D. process, but there is substantial scope for institutions to decide whom they find eligible for the positions of “Assistant Professor” and “Professor”.

*Table 1: Academic ranks/processes necessary for appointing university teachers according to the different legislation*

<b>Position/Act</b>	Higher Education Act No. 80 of 1993	Higher Education Act CXXXIV of 2005	Act CCIV of 2011 On National Higher Education
Assistant lecturer	-	started the PhD course	started the PhD course
Senior Lecturer	-	finished PhD course	Ph.D.
Assistant Professor	PhD	PhD	PhD
Professor	PhD + habilitation	PhD	PhD + habilitation

Although the regulations seem to be clear and straightforward, in practice the appointment of university teachers produced numerous surprising results – thanks to the different interpretations of the concept of ‘eligibility’ in the legal regulation. The significant factors which play a part in the decisions on the eligibility of teachers seem to be, on the one hand, the diverse regulations of the universities and, on the other hand, the actual lobbying power of other HE and scientific institutions (the Hungarian Accreditation Committee and the HAS). According to the 1993 Act, the precondition for nomination to the rank of Professor was successful “Habilitation” – which serves as confirmation of professional eligibility and presentation skills. Later, the title of “Doctor of Science” awarded by the HAS became the precondition for appointment as Professor, although this was later modified to meeting the requirements to become a DSc.

A precondition for the appointment of university teachers is invariably a sufficient number of academic publications. This applies to all proceedings - the award of a PhD or the completion of the habilitation process - and to meeting the eligibility criteria under the Higher Education Act for an Assistant or full Professorship. Since 2005, the teaching time which teachers have to fulfil is 10 hours per week – although taking into account the employers’ individual decisions, this can range between 8 and 17 hours per week. There are huge differences among institutions as to which activities they regard as “educational activity” and how they take these into account. The expectation that academic employees should be both researchers and teachers at the same time is a great barrier to an academic career, and even more so if we consider the frequent changes to these expectations and the differences in their interpretation by different institutions.

Hungarian Higher Education after the transition (the post-Communist era) is characterised by significant rise in the numbers of both students and of Higher Education institutions, and central government has long intended to rationalise the structure of state-financed HE by integrating institutions. The result of this policy – laid out in Act LII of 1999 – is that today we still have 17 state universities and 13 state colleges. Few integrations can be regarded as being a true success.

The legal regulation of the Hungarian HE system also assured a higher degree of autonomy in respect of the appointment of teachers, but the huge increase in the number of universities, colleges, faculties and doctoral schools has resulted in a massively heterogeneous system of eligibility criteria for teachers and of institution-specific procedures for PhD awards and habilitation. This is the reason why neither the PhD degree, nor habilitation nor a professorial appointment (valid for every university) can be regarded as the definitive measure of university teachers’ skills.



In this colourful system, shaped by a variety of institutional interests, the career path of university teachers has become dependent on their specific academic field, on their age and on the appointment practice followed by the university or faculty where they work. This we try to show in the following, based on the example of one specific institution, the University of Pécs.

### 3. Data and Results

We used the official – but totally anonymous – data on the personnel of the University of Pécs, which was provided to the Ministry in October 2013. Our database includes 1,431 employees -both teachers and researchers - and contains data of the current position of the employees, their date of birth and the date of their appointment to their academic post. We also had the employees listed according to their faculties (10 in number) and the integrated university clinics. These eleven organisational units enjoy the same level of decision-making competence and their votes carry the same weight in the common decisions of the university.

However, if we examine Table 2, we can see that the numbers of colleagues of different status (Professor, Assistant Professor, Senior Lecturer, Assistant Lecturer and equivalent Researcher posts) vary considerably, although more striking are the wide variations in numbers in each of the academic ranks. Especially so is the fact that Professorial status (which is valid nationally and requires ministerial approval) shows such a large variation in numbers across the faculties. Even if we ignore the extreme values in the table (e.g., 0-100%), based on our calculations, the ‘Doctor of Science’ awarded by the HAS fluctuates between 40% and 80% in the various faculties. This shows remarkably diverse norms.

*Table 2: The absolute number and relative distribution of colleagues in teacher/researcher categories by academic rank in the faculties of the University of Pécs.*

Position/Scientific Rank	Doctor of Science		Ph. D.		No scientific ranks	
	average	range	average	range	average	range
Professor or equivalent	<b>7,67</b>	<b>0-21</b>	7,5	0-24	0	0-0
	<b>46%</b>	<b>0-100%</b>	45%	0-100%	0%	0-0%
Associate professor or equivalent	0,42	0-2	29	4-62	0	0-0
	3%	0-25%	97%	75-100%	0%	0%
Senior lecturer or equivalent	0,08	0-1	38,25	11-84	1,83	0-6
	0%	0-3%	93%	79-100%	7%	0-21%
Assistant lecturer or equivalent	0	0	4,83	0-21	29,08	3-74
	0%	0-0%	13%	0-77%	87%	23-74%

Our next question refers to the income of the representatives of specific fields. What differences can be experienced as a result of dissimilar career paths and of discretionary retirement practices. Discrepancies in expected incomes can have a serious influence on an individual's way of life and future planning. Likewise, a lack of opportunity can motivate a conscious search for extra income outside the university, which again leads to a decrease of the potential to create real academic value.

To examine this question more closely, we narrowed our sample to 98 professors who had reached “Doctor of Science” rank. We classified by discipline (the Humanities, Technical-, Medical-, Social and Natural Sciences) to calculate the average age for achieving a specific rank in each field, following which we used internal rates of the salary-scale in the public sector and assumed automatic promotion in terms of length of service. In this way we were able to determine total income from the time of achieving the first academic rank to retirement. In respect of retirement age, we used the two extreme values which occur: 65 is the general retirement age, although this may rise to 70 in the case of University Professors (under the Higher Education Act). We calculated incomes from two fields by using these two extremes. Table 3 compares our results for the two most diverse disciplines.

Table 3: The calculated life-time income surplus of Doctors of Science in Natural Sciences compared to that of Doctors of Science in the Humanities within the University of Pécs

Field	Humanities		
Natural Sciences	Retiring age	65 years	70 years
	65 years	16%	-6%
	70 years	<b>39%</b>	13%

If expectations relating to academic activities are the same amongst different disciplines within the university, then the later average age for obtaining higher academic rank experienced in the Humanities and faculty-specific retirement practice (i.e. until what age can a teacher be employed) can have a huge impact on the total life-time incomes of colleagues. The difference between such total incomes can be as high as 39% in favour of Professors in the Natural Sciences as opposed to those in the Humanities. Prolonging employment mitigates this difference, although this provision may give rise to further questions from future generations. Finally, one cannot ignore that factor which has featured throughout the period examined - the distribution of incoming students among the available fields shows a totally opposite picture to that derived from income data (see, e.g. Harsányi-Vince 2012, p. 219).

#### 4. Conclusions

In this brief outline and presentation we have assumed that the career path in the Hungarian HE system includes one or more factors which may have a variety of reasons, levels and explanations. The competencies and responsibilities connected to personnel decisions are not precisely settled by law; the interests of the institutions, i.e. the norms of the various professional platforms (faculties, academic disciplines) show considerable differences. If we add to this the fact that immensely diverse career paths are experienced among the different disciplines, it is evident that great injustice can arise across truly outstanding representatives of a whole generation. This is extremely unhealthy for the system, and there must be a danger that the damage caused will have its effect on the next generation and so create a long-term heritage.

We do, in fact, intend to extract data for a wider range of institutions, which will both produce more solid empirical evidence and also shed light on individual differences. Further, we propose to examine the database of the HAS more thoroughly, since this offers more precise data on the classification of the various disciplines. A more detailed classification and more numerous data can help us to examine comprehensive data for the whole country and to test our hypotheses econometrically.

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#### References

- [1] Higher Education Act No. 80 of 1993
- [2] Higher Education Act CXXXIV of 2005
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