

Time for tenure track in Europe

Sometimes, when you attend a meeting actually to enjoy the scientific talks and debates, a background murmur starts nagging until it makes you sit back and take stock. Such was a recent meeting in New York of EMBO Fellows who work in the USA. There were terrific scientific talks and great research success stories, but during the discussions and coffee breaks a troubling note emerged. Many of the young scientists gave a damning assessment of Europe as a location for their future scientific careers. As most of the participants have reached a point in their lives at which they will soon make a decision on where to establish themselves, their criticisms may be sharpened by anxiety. Or it may simply be brutal honesty.

One telling discussion related to the experience of applying for a job. As the EMBO Fellows tend to be among the best in the European postdoctoral pool—scientists with strong credentials who apply to work in leading institutions on exciting projects—it is not surprising that they are the targets of aggressive recruitment by American universities and research institutes. Employers actively contact the Fellows, invite them to give a seminar, welcome them with a friendly dinner, and, of course, make an enticing offer. This would include a competitive salary, start-up funds, technical support and offers to take care of housing or childcare, to name just a few. Such offers are usually the beginning of tenure track. That ultimately could lead to tenure: a life-long and mutually beneficial relationship. There are, of course, rules attached. If you are good, it works out. If not, you move sideways. But it includes sufficient resources to start a research group, compete with others and gain early independence, which are all important components of a research position. Perhaps this picture is a bit too rosy, but it is a collage of various comments I heard during the meeting.

Contrast this with Europe. Here it is up to you to apply for a position—if you hear about it in time. You are not given any special treatment, such as being invited for dinner, because every applicant must be treated equally. If you are an outsider to the institute, or worse, a foreigner, you would only ask questions about workspace, technical support, child care, housing or promotion if you risked appearing overtly ambitious. You might, or worse, might not, find out that you are competing against an internal candidate, who had the particular merit of carrying a significant teaching load for the professor. You might learn that independence is not the norm and that the head of department will become senior author on all your papers. You might discover that grant applications for start-up group leaders are unlikely to be successful, given the labyrinthine threads that link grant reviewers to applicants, and that it is better to apply jointly with a senior colleague. One participant commented that she had the impression that US universities were planning for a long life together with their employees, whereas in Europe potential employers focused on how to get rid of a researcher if things did not work out: a marriage contract in which the most attention was given to the consequences of splitting up.

Apart from the difference between having to search for positions rather than be sought, there were other concerns. Europe is so fragmented, with major differences in labour regulations and social security, that it is not easy to find a job in a foreign European country in practice even if freedom of movement in the EU is now granted. In many European countries, a hierarchical organization of research is pervasive. In addition, there is a great deal of uncertainty about positions. A recent article (Breithaupt H (2005) A focus on the individual. *EMBO Rep* 6: 16–19) pointed to the tyranny of five-year limits on many research positions in

Germany. Attracting good students or post-docs is very difficult when starting a new group, and by year 3 it is risky for anyone to join, as the group leader has only 2 years left and an uncertain future ahead. In France, there is more stability but a lack of independence, and limited possibilities to promote particularly successful scientists. The UK is generally seen as a better environment in terms of independence, funding and a lack of 'patronage', but for many at the New York meeting, the salaries seem to be out of line there, as elsewhere in Europe.

Time and again, the focus returned to the lack of a transparent career structure, in which opportunities and the criteria to judge an individual's scientific performance are clear. Although the positive aspects of research in the USA were as exaggerated as the negative caricature of Europe, it is time to correct the real deficit. There will be a demographically driven major turnover of group leaders in the next 5–10 years, and if Europe wants the best candidates for these positions, we have to change our attitudes, our rules, our dependence on superiors and our obstruction of talent by withholding independence. Many of these changes could come about by adopting the tenure track system and we should strive to make this the norm. The message I took from New York was clear: we can no longer rely on the yearning of emigrants to return to their homelands as a recruiting tool. We have to change.

We sadly note that Eduard Kellenberger, one of the founders of EMBO and a regular contributor to this journal, died on December 13 at the age of 85. Eduard will be missed for all of his contributions to European science, and particularly for those to EMBO.

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