

The Implementation of Tenure Track Reform at an Estonian University: Unexpected Consequences for University Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines the early implementation of a tenure track reform in one Estonian university and its unintended consequences for university culture, academic identities, and power relations. Drawing on institutional ethnography, the study analyses semi-structured interviews with 21 academic staff across career stages, alongside key university documents from 2019–2024. The analysis is informed by Barnett's concept of the university as a super-complex institution and Bourdieu's theory of the field and power. The findings reveal a discrepancy between the official reform discourse, which framed the tenure track as a stabilising and quality-enhancing mechanism, and academic staff experiences, which were characterised by uncertainty, perceived injustice, and symbolic precarity. The study concludes that tenure track reforms reproduce institutional uncertainty and stratification, highlighting the need to examine their cultural and relational effects critically.

Keywords: *tenure track reform; academic careers; university culture; precarity.*

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, higher education systems in Western Europe, North America, and Australia have experienced profound structural and policy transformations. The global diffusion of neo-liberal higher education policies has reshaped universities through reduced public funding, increased reliance on performance- and competence-based funding mechanisms, the adoption of new public management models, the expansion of audit cultures, rankings, and metric-based evaluation. These reform trends have been widely analysed within the scholarship of critical university studies (see Ball, 2015; Ginsberg, 2011; Collini, 2017). Various negative “unintended consequences” of reforms that go beyond the explicit intentions of the policymakers have been pointed out (e.g., Krücken, 2014). The conflicting demands placed on academics are leading universities and academic professionals into “mission overload”

(Jongbloed et al., 2008). An academic labour market has become increasingly precarious, competitive and stratified with respect to reputation, salaries, and the working conditions of academic professionals (Pechar & Andres, 2015). In many countries, university positions are fixed-term, externally funded, and project-based. This competitive and precarious system exhibits increasing inequalities among academic staff. Contradictory demands and multiple work roles under the conditions of high workload and low job security may lead to work dissatisfaction, high stress and mental problems, as indicated by several studies (e.g., Mark & Smith, 2012).

Similar neo-liberal trends are visible in the Estonian higher education space (Aavik, 2018; Jõgi, Ümarik & Oder, 2020; Mägi et al., 2019). During the recent decade, Estonian universities have faced several parallel reforms and structural changes, reorganization of university units, increasing push for internationalization and introduction of the tenure track system, to mention only some of them.

This paper focuses on exploring the implementation of the tenure track system in one of the Estonian universities in its initial phase. By analysing academics' experiences and interpretations of this reform, the study aims to examine its implications for university culture, academic identities, and collegial relations. The central research questions are: (1) How does the academic staff perceive and make sense of the tenure track reform? (2) What university-level changes are the tenure-track reform triggering? We base our arguments on analysing semi-structured interviews with 21 academic staff from different university departments and career stages. The interview findings will be juxtaposed with the discourse of university documents to identify common themes and tensions between institutional narratives and those expressed by academic staff.

2. Theoretical-conceptual frame

The conceptual frame of the university as a super-complex institution (Barnett, 2016) and Bourdieu's theory of the field and power (Bourdieu, 1999) have been applied as complementary analytical lenses in the study. Barnett conceptualises the university as a super-complex organisation, as an institution characterised by the multiple, often competing, frameworks for understanding its purpose, values, and modes of operation (Barnett, 2016). In this view, the university is not only shaped by organisational structures and governance mechanisms, but also by ongoing epistemic questions about the meanings of the university and the roles of academics at the university (Barnett, 2016). Super-complexity emerges when institutional structures interact in unpredictable and often contradictory ways, producing uncertainty rather than coherence. Such complexity shapes the distribution of institutional power and the social space of the university, influencing how academic work is organised, evaluated, and valued (Barnett, 2016, 132).

To further analyse these dynamics, we draw on Bourdieu's theory of the field, particularly his conceptualisation of the field of power. For Bourdieu (1998), the field of power is constituted by relations among different forms of capital and by struggles over the legitimate principles of domination. As Bourdieu emphasises, such struggles produce a constantly shifting equilibrium in the division of power and labour of domination, including contestation over the legitimate modes of evaluation and reproduction within institutions (Bourdieu, 1998, 1999).

Applied to the university, this perspective reveals career systems, such as the tenure track, as a site of symbolic struggle with the academic field. Tenure tracks intensify precarity and reproduce power relations by reshaping institutional hierarchies rather than alleviating uncertainty. As Barnett (2016) suggests, systems designed to manage complexity may themselves deepen uncertainty, particularly when they operate through prolonged probation and intensified performance evaluation.

For academic staff, such space generates structural challenges and significant affective consequences. Empirical research has reported how precarious employment arrangements are associated with feelings of insecurity, disappointment, powerlessness, and loss of trust (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Joubert & Clarence, 2024). Uncertainty affects academic identity, sense of belonging, career progression, and opportunities for professional development (Joubert & Clarence, 2024). Even academics formally positioned on tenure-track pathways may experience anticipatory precarity, characterised by extended probationary periods, unclear promotion criteria, and dependence on short-term evaluations (Burton & Bowman, 2022).

In our study, we focus on the tenure track system as a field of struggle that is located at the intersection of institutional super-complexity and power relations. By combining Barnett's concept of super-complexity with Bourdieu's analysis of power and struggle, the framework provides a critical basis for empirical analysis of how the tenure track reform in Estonia is perceived by academic staff and what unintended consequences at the university level this reform has triggered.

3. Studying academic lives in the context of reform: methodological approach

Methodologically, the study has been inspired by institutional ethnography (Rankin, 2017), which examines how social relations are mediated through texts. To understand people's actions within institutional contexts, the texts that organize and shape these actions are analysed. Institutional ethnography seeks to reveal how everyday practices at the micro level are connected to broader systemic processes at the meso level, through which power relations are produced and reproduced (Rankin, 2017). Empirical data were collected using regulatory documents and interviews, focusing on the interplay between formal discourses in regulatory documents, academics' perceptions and logic of personal strategies. University documents from

the period of 2019–2024 form the sample for content analysis. The analysis of the documents was focused on the aims of the tenure track reform, the academic roles and responsibilities.

The interview sample was selected using random sampling: random numbers were generated, and respondents were chosen accordingly from the university's online list of academic staff. The interviews were conducted with 21 members of academic staff from one Estonian university between September and November 2022, focusing on how university academics experience their work in academia. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. The interviews followed the pre-designed interview guide. The sample included academics from four academic units, 7 male and 14 female members from different academic positions and career stages. The recorded interviews were verbatim transcribed and analysed by using the inductive thematic analysis method, which included six analytical phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the later stage, the analyses focused on the themes related to a) personal strategies triggered by the tenure track reform; b) professional identity and perception of one's work roles; c) perceived changes in the university context. A matrix of mentioned themes and sub-themes was constructed across all interviewees. Our analyses focused on how personal narratives of identity and work roles intersect with those of university environment, regulations and tenure track reform.

4. Results

4.1. The institutional discourse of tenure track reform at an Estonian university

At the institutional level, the introduction of the tenure track system was framed as a response to contradictions in earlier employment reforms. University documents presented the reform as a way to address unclear promotion criteria, weak performance differentiation, and misalignment between academic roles and strategic priorities within a system of permanent contracts (Proposal of..., 2018).

The new career model, elaborated between 2017 and 2018 and implemented from 2019 onwards, was presented officially as a quality-oriented reform, enabling a supportive and motivating environment for both early career lecturers and professors:

“One important goal of the new career model is to reduce the quantity-oriented requirements and raise the substantive quality requirements so that they are more in line with international practice... In addition, the new career model seeks to create conditions that allow those entering the teaching position to devote themselves more to research and to provide professors with a more motivating and stable work environment...” (Interview with the vice rector, 2018, webpage of the university)

The reform was implemented through a fixed transition period (2019–2024), during which academic staff were required to reposition themselves within the new career model. A limited

number of tenure-track professorships were introduced alongside changes of academic roles and workloads across career stages. While institutional documents framed these measures as rational and transparent, even as they intensified differentiation by concentrating resources and symbolic value in a small number of positions – created tenured professor positions.

“By the decisions of the Senate on 27 January and 15 June 2020, 55 tenure system professor positions were created, which will be filled at X university during the transition period to the new career model, which will last until 31 August 2024. Of these, 29 professor positions will be filled through a public competition and 26 through the certification of existing professors.”
(Academic career model of the X university)

At the level of institutional discourse, the tenure track reform was framed as a modernising instrument to improve efficiency, quality, and strategic governance. The reform narrative emphasised excellence, clarity, and international alignment, while assuming the system would stabilise and motivate academic careers.

4.2. Academic staff perceptions of the tenure track reform in the early phase of the reform

In contrast to the relatively coherent and future-oriented discourse found in university documents, the interview data reveal an ambivalent set of perceptions among academic staff. Awareness and understanding of the tenure track reform varied considerably across career stages and positions. Some interviewees reported having limited knowledge of the reform or perceived it as something that did not affect their current work, at least in the short term.

“I don't understand what should change with this. It hasn't changed... And I think that most people at the university don't have any... that they haven't fully understood what it is and I don't think there's any benefit to it either. Has anyone made it clear to themselves what, what should change with this? I don't know...” (Researcher emeritus)

For the academic staff in docent positions, the reform was experienced as emotionally charged. The tenure track was perceived as introducing additional ambiguity around evaluation, promotion, and long-term security, and was described through metaphors of entrapment, such as a “dead end” or a “trap,” where formal achievements did not translate into career advancement.

“Perhaps I should start by saying that over the past few years I have repeatedly found myself wondering whether I will continue and for what purpose I will continue at university, largely in connection with these new career models, because employees like me, who are in the middle of their careers or in the middle of the associate professorship, have in many ways found themselves in such a trap.” (I11, Docent)

The analysis revealed tensions related to professional identity. Academics who had primarily identified as researchers described a forced reorientation of their self-conception, as the reform appeared to narrow the space for research-intensive careers outside the tenure track. This

identity shift was often accompanied by feelings of loss, marginalization, and a reduced sense of belonging within the university.

“Well, if I've always thought of myself as a researcher, the university career model has made me think of myself perhaps more as a lecturer or... not that I have little ambition, but I feel like I've been left out of it and I've also been caught between the gears of life, in a way...I don't really see an academic career at the moment, in the sense that I can't really see where I can go from there as a docent, although I would have the prerequisites. I have a very good citation rate. Much better than my colleagues who are tenured...” (I2 (Docent))

Although academic autonomy, meaningful work, and collegiality remained central to academics' motivation and self-understandings. These values were experienced as increasingly fragile under managerial and competitive logics. Rather than functioning as a stabilising reform, the tenure track was experienced as a source of injustice and intensified precarity.

4.3. Unintended consequences for university culture: precarity and inequality

The findings indicated broader cultural and structural implications of the tenure track reform, which was widely experienced as intensifying precarity by securing career prospects only for a narrowly defined segment of staff, exposing a gap between formal employment stability and substantive career security. The coexistence of permanent contracts with limited opportunities for advancement created a situation in which formal employment stability did not necessarily translate into meaningful career security.

The reform reconfigured and amplified inequalities, as access to tenure-track positions was perceived as uneven across disciplines, units, and individuals and shaped by existing power relations and strategic priorities. Creation of so-called “strategic” professorships made visible the role of institutional politics in defining which academic profiles and fields were valued. A further unintended consequence concerned the erosion of collegial relations. Competition for scarce tenure-track positions was experienced as weakening collaboration and mutual support among colleagues. Given these results, we recommend that university management address structural inequalities in access to tenure-track positions, increase transparency in selection criteria, and balance strategic priorities. It is also important to mitigate the existing competitive culture and actively foster collaboration through career systems that promote collegiality.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to explore how the introduction of a tenure track system in one Estonian university has been perceived by academic staff and what kinds of broader institutional effects this reform has triggered. The findings are in line with Barnett's (2016) argument that universities are not merely complex organisations but super-complex institutions, in which multiple and often contradictory frameworks for understanding academic work coexist. At the

regulatory level, the case of the tenure track reform analysed was framed as a rational, quality-oriented, and future-facing solution to structural inefficiencies in academic career progression. However, at the level of lived academic experience, this reform deepened rather than resolved uncertainty for many academics, particularly at the mid-career stage

From Bourdieu's perspective, the tenure track system can be interpreted as a reconfiguration of the academic field, in which struggles over legitimate forms of capital have become more explicit. The reform privileged particular academic profiles, especially research-intensive, internationally visible trajectories, while rendering other forms of academic labour less valuable or less visible. In this sense, the tenure track did not merely reflect existing power relations but actively contributed to their reproduction (Bourdieu, 1998). The perceived injustice, particularly among docents, illustrates how symbolic capital and recognition were unevenly redistributed through the reform.

The reform involved unintended consequences that were not merely side effects, but became structurally embedded in the university culture. One such consequence concerns the intensification of precarity. Although academic staff were formally employed on permanent contracts, the limited availability of tenure-track positions and the heightened performance expectations associated with them generated what might be described as symbolic precarity. This resonates with earlier research on precarious academic labour, which shows that insecurity is not solely tied to contract type, but also to career prospects, recognition, and access to institutional resources (Burton & Bowman, 2022). Another unintended consequence was the reconstruction of inequality within the university as the reform introduced new hierarchies between those positioned inside and outside the tenure track, reinforcing divisions across career stages, disciplines, and units. Increased competition for limited positions was perceived to undermine collegiality and trust, leading to a more individualised academic environment. This tension between competition and collaboration reflects a broader contradiction within neo-liberal university governance, where collective academic values coexist uneasily with individualised performance regimes (Ginsberg, 2011).

An important consideration in interpreting these findings is the temporal context in which the data were collected. The interviews capture academic perceptions during the initial and transitional phase of the tenure track reform, when uncertainty, lack of information, and institutional learning processes were particularly pronounced. Since the period of data collection, the university has introduced adaptations to the original career model, most notably the first steps of creating a parallel track of so-called "university professors". This pathway, which is less prestigious and primarily project-based funded, can be interpreted as an institutional response to some of the tensions and unintended consequences identified in this study. It risks further stratifying the academic workforce by formalising a two-tier professorial system, thereby reinforcing symbolic and material inequalities.

To conclude, research shows that the tenure track reform produced new forms of symbolic precarity and competition, undermining collegiality and reconfiguring hierarchies. These tendencies are not specific to Estonia but reflect broader dynamics in the international higher education landscape and changing roles of academics.

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