

Career Policy: Lifting the Fog of Professional Perspectives

Young Academy Leiden – *Position Paper*

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Summary

The Dutch academic system faces a structural deficit in professional development opportunities. Leiden University is no exception to this, where many early career researchers feel uncertain about job stability and advancement opportunities. This is exacerbated by excessive work pressures, the need to obtain external funding, the overuse of temporary contracts, and opaque procedures. To improve the situation, we outline a set of recommendations below, including:

- Use clear communication about the prospects for permanency and promotion, and consistently apply objective, realistic and transparent career guidelines that include a merit-based assessment of ‘academic citizenship’.
- Open up the *ius promovendi* to a larger group of academics, including all associate professors, and remove the distinction between promotor and co-promotor.
- Implement the KNAW’s proposal for a ‘rolling grant’ fund for all academics as part of a wider reform of academic funding in the Netherlands.
- End the structural underfinancing of Dutch universities and earmark part of any additional funding for more permanent positions, more first-stream-funded PhD positions, and more advancement opportunities for all academics, with an emphasis on underrepresented groups.

Background

The Dutch academic system not only has a significant structural funding deficit (1.1 billion EUR according to a [recent, independent study](#)) but, consequently, also a structural deficit when it comes to offering professional perspectives. In the Netherlands, it takes on average [nineteen years](#) between obtaining a PhD and becoming a full professor (*hoogleraar*). The road between these two points in time, however, is a winding and foggy one, filled with traffic jams, obstacles, and a good deal of anxiety. It is also not an inevitable one.

According to 2019 data from the [Rathenau Institute](#) (counted in full-time equivalents), there were 3002 full professors (*hoogleraren*) at Dutch universities. These stood vis-à-vis 2377 associate professors (UHDs),

5376 assistant professors (UDs), 7518 lecturers (*docenten*)/researchers/post-docs, and 8731 doctoral candidates. An often-heard argument in debates about career prospects is that not all of these have to – or even want to – become full professors. However, this is rather beside the point, the main concern being that academics do not want to live under precarious employment conditions and many would like to see realistic opportunities for career advancement.

For Leiden University, developing ‘a strategic career policy is high on the University’s agenda’ ([Institutional Plan](#), p. 13). To this end, our university has committed to the development of ‘[o]bjective and transparent criteria ... for the promotion and advancement of current academic staff’, ‘an active policy of equal opportunities for all individuals in both the recruitment and career advancement of talented staff’. The goal is to ‘give young academics clear advice about their career prospects’, with additional attention for postdocs. Individual faculties, moreover, have developed their own guidelines for promotion.

The [2021 Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities](#) includes the provision that a permanent contract will be offered to everyone who combines research and teaching after a maximum of 18 months of employment (unless people are in a ‘tenure track’). This offers job security more quickly to these staff members, but the situation for lecturers with a fulltime teaching position (*docenten*) does not change.

However, more work remains to be done. As noted in the report [Academia in Motion: Recognition and Rewards at Leiden University](#), among the factors prompting a renewed discussion about recognition and rewards in academia is the ‘lack of transparency in career policy, quality of assessment and leadership.’ The report, therefore, calls for ‘more clarity about career prospects, conditions for permanent appointment and criteria for promotion’ and a ‘culture change “from I to we”’ with ‘implications for policy relating to remuneration, promotion and careers’.

In this position paper, we raise a number of concerns from the point of view of early career researchers, who find themselves still in the beginning stages of their journey through the Dutch academic system. The paper is informed, moreover, by experiences shared by participants at the [Young Interfaculty Lunch on Recognition and Rewards](#) organized by YAL on 3 March 2021. Based on these concerns, we put forward a number of recommendations for the short, medium and long term.

Points of concern

Among many early career researchers, there is a pervasive sense of uncertainty about their professional future at Leiden University. This uncertainty operates at two levels: firstly, job stability, i.e., whether there is a prospect for a permanent position following an extended period of performing well and having played an important role at one’s university. While the provision of the new collective labour agreement to award a permanent contract after 18 months is encouraging, we should ensure that this does not lead to a replacement of assistant professors by temporary teaching-only lecturers (*docenten*). The second level of uncertainty concerns advancement opportunities, i.e., whether there are prospects to be promoted, especially beyond the university lecturer/assistant professor (UD) level.

The roads to stable employment and professional advancement in Dutch academia are clogged up, not least at Leiden University. According to numbers from the [Rathenau Institute](#), among assistant professors in the Netherlands, the percentage of those who leave their current university is larger than that of those who advance to senior positions there, i.e. 47% compared to 37%. Among the other academic staff, including postdocs, only a small percentage (18%) ever advances to the higher functions of assistant/associate/full professor. While this can happen for a variety of reasons, including the optimistic outlook of launching successful careers outside of academia, there are also many stories of people leaving academia because of a lack of prospects for a permanent position or professional advancement in a structurally underfunded working environment.

The lack of job stability and prospects for promotion is discouraging, especially when combined with excessive [work pressures](#). As noted by the Dutch national Young Academy in its report on 'recognition and rewards' (*erkennen en waarderen*), '[i]n the current system, academics are often presented with an unrealistic set of tasks, in which we demand everything from one person. Academics are asked to excel in research, education, management, impact, science communication, patient care (in the university medical centres – UMCs) and more' (De Jonge Akademie, [Goed voorbeeld doet goed volgen](#), p. 15). While being required to act – and excel – as a 'jack of all trades', the long-term rewards of such labours are all but clear.

In particular, the dependency on external funding is the elephant in the room in the discussions about both precarious employment and career deadlocks. According to the KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), 'the career of many scientific talents is stagnating, as success in obtaining research grants has become the most important, if not the only, criterion for an appointment or promotion' ([KNAW, Het Rolling-Grantfonds](#), p. 9). As a consequence, in Dutch academia, it often feels like you are mainly defined by the bottom line of your external funding acquisitions.

Thus, when Leiden University's institutional plan notes that '[t]o date, research performance has dominated the University's policies on appointment and promotion' ([Institutional Plan](#), p. 20), this has become virtually synonymous with obtaining large ('structural') grants. An aggravating factor in this context is the [Matthew effect](#), i.e., the accumulation of grants, often leveraged into obtaining promotions, for a small group of academics, leading to a 'super star model' that leaves the so-called 'have-nots' by the wayside.

Lecturers (*docenten*) find themselves in a particularly precarious position. They are generally hired only on temporary contracts with no research time. It is worrying that about three quarters of 'other academic personnel' work on the basis of [temporary contracts](#), shouldering an increasingly large share of teaching duties. This leads to the practice of the '[revolving door](#)', where lecturers are hired and fired on a continuous basis, and sometimes re-hired after a waiting period to avoid the legal obligation of giving them permanent contracts. So far, the only 'solution' to this problem has been to turn the revolving door into an exit, which does not help these lecturers.

Furthermore, concerns remain with regard to inequality in career prospects. Women remain underrepresented in academic positions in the Netherlands. As summarized by the [Rathenau Institute](#), ‘the higher the function, the smaller the percentage of women’ (*hoe hoger de functie, hoe kleiner het aandeel vrouwen*). Currently only about a quarter of full professors in the Netherlands are women, with the numbers for UHDs and UDs being approximately 30% and 40%, respectively. Leiden University is [doing better](#) in this regard than the national average with 29.7% of its professors being women, while still being a far cry from anything approaching parity.

Other universities have experimented with more aggressive policies to raise the number of female academics. The [TU Eindhoven](#), for instance, only accepted applications from female candidates, unless there had been no applications received after six months for each vacancy. However, this was [criticised](#) by the Dutch College for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) for amounting to unlawful discrimination against male candidates.

Equality in career prospects is also related to work-life balance. An academic career is too often regarded as a 24/7 endeavour. In addition to limiting structural work beyond contract hours, there is no reason why people who prefer working part-time or for whom a full-time position is simply not an option, for example due to care duties, cannot be successful academics as well.

Finally, we recognize that it is difficult to develop a career policy that satisfies everyone, even under the best conditions. At the end of the day, it is likely that more people seek a position or promotion in academia than the university can accommodate. There will always be disagreements on the relative weights of various types of contributions to academia. Still, we must endeavour to make this as transparent and fair as possible, particularly under the stifling financial conditions under which universities currently operate.

Recommendations

To address these concerns, we make the following recommendations for the short, medium and long term.

Recommendations for changes that we can implement within the next 6 months:

- We call for clearer and more honest communication about the prospects for permanency and promotion, including the absence thereof. We stress the need for objective, realistic career guidelines that include a merit-based assessment of ‘[academic citizenship](#)’. This should be fully taken into account at every institute’s annual staff review (*vlootschauw*). Strongly divergent practices between faculties and institutes should be avoided and the current practice at certain institutes to predominantly consider large grants as the factor prompting a promotion should be ended. For the sake of greater transparency, faculties need to adhere to their own guidelines when implementing their promotion decisions to avoid any impression of favouritism and

nepotism. Setting clear guidelines, including timelines, of when academics can apply for a promotion could be a helpful tool in this effort.

- We call for the further diversification of career paths, including those with an emphasis in teaching excellence and science communication. The current ‘jack of all trades’ model in a structurally underfunded environment, combined with the lack of transparency and clear criteria, exerts unhealthy pressures on early career researchers, not knowing what to prioritize when and why. While each path should maintain the unity between teaching and research (as stressed also in [YAL’s earlier policy paper](#) on this subject), clear tracks with different emphases, criteria and expectations would significantly lessen the uncertainty and anxiety of early career researchers.
- We support the initiative to designate the *universitair docent 1* (UD1) level as “senior assistant professor”, which is already in use at some other Dutch universities. This would make the promotion from UD2 to UD1 visible and acknowledge the fact that the UD bracket currently spans a broad spectrum from academics just starting out to those having served in this position for many years, with little to no possibility to advance further due to the gridlock of the current system. Since this would indicate a certain level of experience and seniority useful in international contexts (e.g. conferences, publications or grant application) rather than national ones, there would be no need for a special designation in Dutch. At the same time, this should not be regarded as a substitute for the more wide-ranging reforms presented below.

Recommendations for changes that we can start implementing over the next 6 to 18 months:

- As an important step to break down hierarchical structures that are out of tune with reality, we recommend opening up the *ius promovendi* (the right to supervise PhD candidates) to a larger group of academics. This includes, as a first step, all associate professors, as has been the case already at [Maastricht University](#) since 2020. Moreover, we recommend removing the distinction between promotor and co-promotor, which often does not reflect the role of members on the supervision committee. These steps lead to a more flexible policy regarding *ius promovendi* would better acknowledge the work thus far carried out by the so-called ‘daily supervisors’ and make it easier for early career researchers to deal with the pressures of showing PhD supervision experience as part of the criteria for a permanent contract, promotion or obtaining external funding. Instead, ‘supervision teams’ of three, comprising a senior, mid-career, and early-career academic, could become the norm. One of them can serve as a primary/daily supervisor.
- Becoming professor by special appointment (*bijzonder hoogleraar*) should be based on academic merits, assessed on the basis of transparent criteria. The positions can serve as an important stepping stone for early and mid-career academics, and should be used as such for the most part.
- We need to ensure that career prospects for early career researchers are less dependent on the acquisition of external grants and help them gain sufficient time for in-depth, extensive research. We therefore support the KNAW’s proposal for a [‘rolling grant’ fund](#) for all academics as part of a wider reform of academic funding in the Netherlands, which should also make institutes less financially dependent on their academic staff bringing in large grants. This would also reduce

pressure and work time currently consumed by the quasi-constant need to prepare grant proposals.

- Regarding the underrepresentation of women, YAL welcomes that Leiden University has met its 2020 target of 27% but encourages further action to approach parity at all levels of academic functions. A quota applied to new appointments and promotions should be considered to advance greater gender equality in this area further. Specific attention should be paid to (sub)fields with large gender inequalities among doctoral students and early career academics.

Recommendations for larger, structural changes that we should start working on now:

- We support the idea that institutes with very few PhDs but a high number of temporary teaching contracts should get the option of transforming a number of these contracts into stable funding for PhD contracts with a strong component of required teaching tasks (for example: 6 year positions with 30% teaching, like PhD fellows in the Law School). The University should financially support institutes to do so.
- We argue for reducing anachronistic academic hierarchies in the Netherlands. The ‘everyone professor’ (*iedereen professor*) initiative is a radical but intriguing proposal to break down hierarchies and refocus academics on their core tasks. This idea also bears resemblance to the Belgian model, where different job titles remain, but are not prominently communicated (e.g. on websites) and do not matter regarding the *ius promovendi*.
- Academics should have the option to work on part-time contracts if they prefer this. Of course, this should not mean that those who are working on these contracts are in practice expected to work full time, and this should not limit their career prospects.
- Last but not least, we call for the end of structural underfinancing of Dutch universities, which is the main root cause of excessive work pressures, declining quality of education, the scramble for overly competitive grant schemes, and the scarcity of professional stability and advancement opportunities. A significant part of the direly needed additional funding should be committed to more permanent positions, especially at the lecturer level, more first-stream-funded PhD positions, and more advancement opportunities for all academics, with an emphasis on underrepresented groups.