Promotion to full professor – competence or competition?

Introduction
In Norway, promotion to the rank of full professor has traditionally been dependent on vacant positions and competition with other applicants. However, from 1993 on, associate professors can apply for promotion to full professorships on the basis of individual research competence irrespective of vacant professorships. This change in the career structure was first proposed by a government commission set up in 1987 to evaluate all aspects of the higher education system in Norway, including personnel policy. The main argument for this reform was that many faculty members had a position and salary below their true level of qualifications and that this situation was unfair. The committee furthermore argued that a system allowing promotion to full professor on the basis of achieved research competence would enhance motivation for scholarly work. Increased productivity and better quality of research would most likely be the outcome of such a reform. The committee furthermore assumed that the reform would make it easier for universities and colleges to recruit and retain academic staff because staff could plan their career without depending on professorships becoming vacant. The committee finally assumed that the reform would make it easier to increase the number of women professors. A career system where promotion to full professorship could be achieved on the basis of personal research competence would enhance women’s opportunities compared to the traditional career system based on competition between several applicants.

Two members of the committee did not, however, support this reform proposal and feared that negative consequences might outweigh the benefits. They claimed that the reform would lead to less mobility between higher education institutions because those who had professorial competence would no longer need to apply for a vacant professorship at another institution to achieve this status. Furthermore, the minority feared that the institutions would have fewer opportunities than hitherto to exert influence on the research profile of new professors. It would not be possible for the department to specify research and teaching specialities of promoted professors in the same way as had been possible when advertising a vacant professorship.

This reform made it possible to become a full professor in three different ways: a) by applying for a vacant professorship in open competition and to be appointed as the best qualified applicant; b) by applying for a vacant professorship in open competition, being found competent but not the best qualified by the evaluation committee and then being promoted to full professor on the basis of individual competence; and c) by applying for promotion to full professor on the basis of individual competence and being found competent by a national peer review committee.

This paper analyses the outcome of this reform.

The data
The paper is based on: a) data files on the applicants for promotion, including the results of the applications, b) register data on university staff, c) interviews with the university deans and the rector of the university colleges on their experience with the academic career system, and d) survey data of tenured university staff in 1982, 1992 and 2001.

Results
The changes in the career structure have led to a substantial increase in the number of full professors in the universities, from 37 percent of the tenured academic staff in 1991 to 47 percent in 2001 (Kyvik, Olsen and Hovdhaugen 2003).

On average 60 percent of the applicants for promotion to full professor were found competent by the national peer review committees.
There are several aspects to be discussed concerning the consequences of this reform. The reform may have implications for the career course of the university researchers, the competence and quality of professors, gender equality, the mobility of the researchers, and opportunities for institutional steering of professorial research specialisation.

The career perspective
Young researchers have been given better career opportunities. This seems to be the main consequence of the reform. Expectations have been created amongst doctoral students and post docs that promotion to full professors will be made possible following a period as associate professor. So far, the reform has only to a small extent influenced on the average age of professors at the time of their appointment, which is 47-48 years.

The quality perspective
In general, the reform seems to maintain the average scientific and academic level of the professors. According to a majority of the informants the professors found competent by a national peer review committee have about the same scientific qualifications as the professors appointed after open competition. Publication data covering a 20-year period support this conclusion.

The gender equality perspective
The women percentage of Norwegian professors is low, and increased from 9 per cent in 1991 to 13 per cent in 2001. In the same period the proportion of female associate professors increased from 16 to 31 percent. The reform thus seems to have had only a minor effect on the percentage of female professors. However, as many female applicants as male applicants have been found competent by the national committees. If this tendency continues, and if the women percentage of the associate professors will still be increasing in the years to come, the percentage of women full professors will also increase substantially.

The mobility perspective
Lower staff mobility between institutions is a negative effect of the reform. The mobility rate was low also before the introduction of the reform, and has decreased over the last decade.

The steering perspective
The effect of the reform on the possibility of academic leaders to direct the development of their faculties and departments is vague. Some deans at the universities argued that the reform had made it more difficult to exert influence on the research profile of new professors, while most of the rectors of the university colleges stated that this was no problem.

Conclusion
The reform of the academic career structure in Norway has no direct parallel in other countries. In most countries the competition model still prevails, implying that persons aspiring to become a full professor have to apply for vacant professorships in open competition. In Sweden, however, a promotion system resembling the Norwegian system was introduced in 1999. As opposed to the Norwegian model, the Swedish system is locally managed; each institution evaluates applications from their own staff for promotion to full professor. Also at American and British universities, faculty members have the possibility to apply for promotion to full professor on the basis of individual competence, but contrary to in Norway and Sweden, this opportunity is not an institutionalised arrangement initiated by the government. It is entirely up to each university to make decisions on the academic career system.

What consequences have the policies and traditions of the different countries had for the number of professors in the higher education sector? Obviously, the Norwegian and Swedish promotion systems have resulted in a considerably higher number of full professors than would have been the case if this promotion system had not existed. In general, the proportion of full professors of the total academic staff is far smaller in countries practise the competition system as a main academic career model. Finland is an exception, however. In Finland no promotion as full professor can be made on the basis of individual competence. Still, the proportion of full professors in Finland is about the same as in Norway.
References