# editorial

As regular readers of *EPS* will know very well, our remit is to cover the teaching, research and professional matters of interest to the European political science community. This issue of the journal is one that we have decided to devote entirely to professional matters, where the main focus is on the symposium edited by Martin Rhodes on the professional opportunities (or the lack thereof) open to young political scientists in European universities, as well as on the more general predicament of European university systems, analysed by Bas Jacobs and Rick van der Ploeg.

As the symposium pieces highlight, in many European countries, starting an academic career remains, as Goerres and Warntjen (p. 254) put it, 'a huge gamble which only the lucky, the rich or the natural born academics can afford'. The result is 'a profession that is very unattractive at the moment'. Specifically, the principal common features of the situation facing young academics in much of Europe appear to be:

- growing numbers of PhD holders but a lack of any corresponding increase in the number of permanent positions available to accommodate them;
- a consequent growth in the significance of the more precarious, less secure types of employment contract as newly qualified academics 'join the queue' waiting for the more permanent positions to become available;
- an increase in the average age at which permanent employment is obtained;
- a continuing tendency in appointments unduly to favour 'insiders' (those already having some connection with the university in question) at the expense of (sometimes better qualified) 'outsiders'.

A number of points need to be made about this. Much of the problem of insiders versus outsiders appears to arise from a failure of the university systems concerned properly to distinguish between what is required to ensure adequate promotion opportunities for *existing* job-holders, and what is required in order to expand the *overall number* of job-holders of whatever level. In some southern European countries, the only means of climbing the ladder within universities is by seeking to win appointment to a newly created post, filled by open competition, with the result that universities use these competitions not only to expand their staff numbers but also to promote existing staff. If this is the only way in which promotion can be obtained, then in our view it is not surprising that institutions have their favoured, internal, candidates or that the competitions themselves are marked by clientelism. What is surprising is that legislators apparently appear unable to see this and that the *de facto* lobby of tenured faculty in support of such inequities appears to be so strong. What ought to happen is that *existing* job-holders have regular opportunities to apply for promotion, with all who satisfy the criteria being offered it regardless of their number, while open competition is used only to fill genuinely *new* places (see Huisman *et al* (2002) for a general analysis of these issues).

But this requires that two other things also happen: first, that academics begin to contribute to an effective lobby for reform that transcends their own narrow interests as permanent employees and



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extends to new entrants to the profession and beyond to the more general state of the university systems in which they work; and second, that politicians in Europe focus their attention on the pitiful state of education in much of the continent and begin the painful process of making the late transition from medievalism (in which many university systems are still mired) to the twenty-first century.

Regarding the first point, the need for an effective lobby, although there are signs of growing resistance to the employment conditions to which young academics are subject – the Federation of Young Researchers, mentioned by Judith Clifton (p. 239), is a good example – there remain significant obstacles, some more or less specific to academics themselves, to attempts to win improvements. One of these is alluded to by Malin Stegman McCallion (p. 286) when she writes that she 'can do what [she] love[s] and be paid for doing it': namely, the widespread belief that whatever the risks and economic uncertainties involved in the attempt to make a career in academia, academics of whatever level remain fundamentally privileged as compared to other occupational groups insofar as they have much greater freedom to set their own routines and work agendas. Clearly, the more one feels one occupies a position of privilege the less likely one is to want to do very much, especially of a confrontational nature, to change it. Another obstacle is the relative unavailability to academics of forms of collective action able to exert influence – unless action takes the form of assessment boycotts of the kind currently being undertaken by the Association of University Teachers in Britain following two decades in which, as Prime Minister Blair has acknowledged, academic staff salaries 'have shown practically no increase in real terms'. But the impact on students of action of this kind makes it difficult to sustain without reserves of solidarity to which academics, notoriously individualistic and conservative in outlook and behaviour, are not usually accustomed.

We think that difficulties such as these argue in favour of national political science associations giving greater priority to political lobbying functions in their activities. Not only might such a stance set an example for the professional associations representing other disciplines to follow, but of all academic communities, political scientists have at least three reasons for adopting it. First, as social scientists whose position differs fundamentally from that of natural scientists (in that their subject matter is not refractory to their efforts to understand it) they will be especially aware of the impossibility of remaining uninvolved. 'Neutrality' in this as in any other matter is itself a political position having real political consequences. Second, they will be aware, as a substantive matter, of the importance of addressing the shortcomings in academic pay and employment conditions and in the general tertiary education policies of European governments if Europeans are to maintain at an adequate level the knowledge base of their economies. Third, as social scientists they should be better equipped than most to understand the crippling effects on institutions and the mobility of new entrants to the profession of 'insider-dominated' labour markets, the consequences of clientelism and corruption, the stultifying character of public monopolies and the deepening nature of the crisis in which an expansion of mass university education is not accompanied by a proportionate increase in resources.

This is of particular importance in relation to the Europe–US comparisons that frequently feature so prominently in the pages of *European Political Science*. In relation to the discipline, some colleagues will question claims that political science is more vibrant in the United States. But in relation to economics and the health of



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the universities in which we work there is very little room for argument. With the development of the 'new economy' – and this is our second point – the United States has for a long time seen rates of productivity growth far higher than those of Europe, and the importance of education and training in this is well recognised. Reflecting that recognition, the US outspends Europe on tertiary-level education by more than 50 per cent per student (Schleicher, 2006). While an awareness of the decline of European universities has seen European governments drive increasingly rapid change in their countries' systems of higher education in recent years, delivering enhanced university performance has often been detrimental to the well-being of the staff (higher teaching loads, more insecure contracts) given that these reforms are not being backed in most countries by the requisite increase in investments – especially in personnel.

Note also that much of the higher US investment in education is due to large US contributions from tuition-paying students and the private sector, linked to much improved access to higher education for a broader swathe and greater socio-economic spread of the population than is typical in the EU; and that continental European countries are undermining their own universities by neither making the public investment required nor allowing them to charge tuition fees (Schleicher, 2006). As Jacobs and van der Ploeg (p. 297) point out in this volume, '[h]igher education… has little scope for technological progress [insofar as t]eaching and research need to be done by highly qualified people who cannot be replaced by technology'. As they also warn, the requisite investment in human resources in our education systems also demands some radical shifts in the traditional funding formulae for higher education. At the micro-level of university management, the inattention to the career inadequacies facing young, and not so young, academics in Europe today is more than likely to reveal itself as a dangerous false economy. But little can be achieved in resolving that particular issue until much broader macro reforms of tertiary education systems in Europe are forced to the centre of the policy agenda.

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## References

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