In its recent communication “Supporting Growth and Jobs: An agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems”, the European Commission once again urged universities to reform human resources policies – to increase their autonomy around human resources issues and to introduce incentives to reward excellence in teaching and research.

Europe’s universities will need to recruit academics by flexible, open and transparent procedures and to provide them with attractive career prospects. Without a committed and adequately compensated professoriate, universities will find it hard to recruit the best and brightest academics to work for them and to provide the teaching and research that Europe needs in order to be a competitive, knowledge-driven region.

When comparing the attractiveness of the academic profession between European countries, salaries are naturally a key place to start.

When we compare European countries such as Italy, the United Kingdom, France, The Netherlands and Germany with the United States, and take into account international differences in purchasing power, Italy displays the widest salary range between entry-level, medium-level and top-level positions.

Like the UK, it offers relatively high salaries to senior academics. The UK compares relatively well with the US, judging from the average academic salary. For entry-level positions (for example, assistant professor) the salaries are lower and higher for top-end positions.

French universities are not particularly attractive to foreign professors due to France’s national career framework and non-competitive salaries. Hiring is very centralised, with a national screening of candidates by national councils.

Until recently, institutional salary policies were not allowed, but this is changing. A bonus system to reward performance in teaching and research has recently been introduced, alongside laws to increase the autonomy of universities and to introduce more differentiation among academics.

Bonuses for good performance now also exist in Germany, although only about 25% of university professors there receive such a bonus.

But salaries alone do not reflect an accurate picture of academic incomes: academic compensation must be measured in broader terms.

There are often fringe benefits and allowances that academics may receive on top of their wages. Some of these add-ons are determined collectively – often in collective labour-market agreements, such as in The Netherlands – and depend on the academic’s family status and on national regulations with respect to pensions, parental leave and health insurance.

Other allowances are determined individually, such as performance bonuses, or – as in the case of German professors – depend on individuals’ skill at negotiating a good package.
In many countries there is a move toward more fixed-term appointments and a greater number of part-time posts.

**Germany**

In Germany, the terms of continuing contracts are quite strict, and academics are routinely forced to leave a position at the end of a contract. For young researchers, the basic principle is ‘up or out’.

Professors are generally civil servants with permanent, lifelong positions that they have obtained after receiving ‘habilitation’, a formal postdoctoral qualification usually earned after the publication of a major book and a public lecture.

For other academic staff members, such as lecturers and 'postdocs', wages are much lower and jobs are more insecure; more than two-thirds are temporary employees on fixed-term contracts.

The junior professorship is a new academic category in Germany, created to shorten the time until eligibility for a professorship has been reached, with the aim of abolishing the ‘habilitation’.

To avoid ‘inbreeding’, it is a general rule that junior professors need to apply for a position at a different institution after six years. However, so far the availability of such professorships has fallen short of original expectations.

The typical way to acquire a professorship or a promotion to a higher position, or to increase one’s salary, involves applying for a professorship at a different university. If the application is successful, it is sometimes possible to negotiate salary supplements and additional resources in order to stay at one’s old university or as a condition for accepting the new position.

Due to social insurance and benefits, the income of German academics is quite good compared to other countries. However, uncertain career prospects make universities appear less attractive employers – especially for young researchers.

**United Kingdom**

Compared to France, universities in the UK have much more autonomy over whom to appoint and what to pay them. Academics in the UK do not have civil-servant status, unlike in most other European countries.

Over the course of more than 20 years of continuous marketisation, British universities have been competing vigorously to attract high-quality academic staff with better salaries and terms of employment. Each university has different hiring practices, rewards and promotion criteria.

Academic pay and promotions are heavily based on an individual’s research productivity, which is assessed regularly. Universities also try to attract leading researchers with non-monetary rewards, such as equipment and laboratories.
In recent years there has been a substantial improvement in academic salaries and benefits. However, due to the recent cuts in public funding, the continued affordability of the (quite competitive) UK salaries and benefits has been called into question.

The proportion of staff with part-time contracts has increased over the past three years. The ability to secure high-level academics in the future will pose a major challenge to the UK higher education system.

The Netherlands

As in the UK, the higher education sector in The Netherlands has always attracted academic talent from the rest of the world.

This is clearly not just because of attractive salaries and other benefits and rewards, but also due to the recognised excellence of its research activities and the reputation of a system that is open to researchers from all over the world.

Academic salaries and other terms of employment in the Dutch higher education system are settled by universities in negotiation with labour unions that represent academics.

The resulting collective labour agreements leave significant room for individual universities to determine job tasks and tenure criteria, with salary increments increasingly based on an assessment of merit through annual reviews of performance.

There is a trend toward more individualised employment contracts. Such à la carte schemes help make working conditions in academia more attractive during times when, due to the impending retirement of a large number of senior academics in the years to come, the ability to secure high-level academics will continue to pose a major challenge.

In order for Europe to remain an attractive place for academics to work and to retain talented people (young and old) for its economies, the challenge will be to balance the pay conditions for academics with a package of non-financial rewards – such as facilities for personal development and a reasonable degree of independence for carrying out teaching and research tasks.

After all, money is not the only driver of job satisfaction for academics.

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