

Academic career and talent attraction: a need and an opportunity for the UAB*

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Dealing with talent and how to attract, develop and preserve it is a key issue in university policy from its very origin, as its triple function – research, teaching and service to society and knowledge transfer – would be impossible without talent. Policies to attract talent can of course be very different, depending on such diverse variables as the legal system and the university management model, existing resources, existence of purely research and/or teaching-based careers or, as is the case of Spain after the University Reform Act, going for a mixed model that considers both researchers and teachers as academic staff. In this case, it is possible to adjust the degree of dedication to teaching and research in the different academic stages. The implementation of the model that conceives university as part of the triple helix of innovation, social and economic progress, together with public authorities and business, included another function into university recently: knowledge and technology transfer.

* The article explains the rationale and the goals of the new academic career, a driver of innovation and excellence fostered by the UAB (Autonomous University of Barcelona) management and the 2006-2009 master plan worked out by the management and passed by the Board of Professors and the Management Council. It is thus the outcome of a collective task.

Recruiting professors is a key issue for universities, for quality targets in research and teaching depend on it. However, it is neither easy nor free from controversy: the degree of autonomy given by legislation to universities, the origin and also the discussion on different recruitment methods and the controversial analysis of its efficiency and even its objectivity and transparency need to be considered. Moreover, changes in legislation, in fact not yet completed, have taken place in recent years, affecting significantly the policies of universities regarding professors: the University Act and modified University Act, the University Act of Catalonia, adaptation to the European higher education space, the shift from a national certification to an accreditation system – with the uncertainty if there are going to be different accreditation bodies automatically recognising each other's results – and later competitions to enter every university.

Quality targets in research and teaching depend directly on professor recruitment.

In this respect, in its 2006-2009 master plan, worked out by the current managing team and passed by the Board of Professors and the Management Council, the UAB is thinking of a process of generational move in academic staff as the most important strategic change within the institution, following the recommendation of the latest institutional assessment of the European University Association. Such a change is especially important as it would affect hundreds of people, many of whom created the university and have thus been in charge of its quality. Put in other words, recruiting new professors is a paramount issue to manage a planned change while safeguarding a high degree of quality in teaching and research able to place the UAB among the best European universities. Hence it became necessary to lay out a new academic career model based on the search for talent and able to be implemented progressively.

Following the scientific model, the starting situation was assessed in first place. This diagnosis

allowed to draw some conclusions valid for the UAB and mostly for the rest of Spanish universities:

- ▶ A long teaching career in which stabilisation as a tenured, appointed doctor or aggregate professor occurs at around forty years of age (while it is commonly said that maximum research productivity and creativity is reached at around thirty).
- ▶ A teaching career based on a big variety of jobs done in the initial training stage the basic goal of which is precisely obtaining the PhD: trainees, post-doctoral fellows, associates, collaborators, assistants, assistant doctors, lecturers, etc. Access to some of these positions very often occurred shortly after graduating and several jobs were done over years. These positions have different salaries and labour and teaching duties, sometimes even to do the same task.
- ▶ A staff based on people trained at the same university, especially in the last years, with low attraction of external academic staff. Most permanent professors recently stabilised did their PhD at the UAB and then went for a career in different positions while waiting to obtain accreditation or the national certification to have access to a permanent position.

All in all, it was an unsuitable and probably unfair model for people, who settled late and under quite different conditions, with an initial phase (training, PhD thesis) often hampered by having to do too many tasks (particularly teaching, sometimes with very much dedication) that were not central to their basic goal, as well as for the institution, which had less room for recruitment. To summarise, it was a model that could appear endogamic but in most cases was due to a combination of factors that have set the labour pattern of many professors beyond their own will – excessive dedication to teaching, which took part of the time they could devote to research on the one hand, and created dependency bonds between young researchers and their departments on the other. All this affected, at least potentially and without

any demand for quality of stabilised academic staff, the search for new talent as the recruitment basis was reduced.

The UAB has laid out a new academic career model geared to talent search, based on creating two different stages in teaching and researching staff training, an early retirement plan and fostering post-doctoral stages at other universities and research centres.

As the diagnosis pointed out problems and causal relations, it allowed to lay out the new professor policy based on three key elements:

- ▶ A clear separation into two different stages for staff in training, distinguishing between an initial research stage and a second one of consolidation as a professor, as occurs usually in Anglo-Saxon countries.
- ▶ An early retirement plan with successful incentives in order to ensure gradual change.
- ▶ Fostering post-doctoral stages of UAB doctors at other institutions by means of own policies and partnerships with other universities, together with calls for post-doctoral grants at the UAB aimed at people not trained at our university.

All this was to attract researchers with a good post-doctoral record both within and outside the UAB so the recruitment of professors in consolidation could allow to seize the most valuable teaching and research professionals for the university. From a perspective of strategies to seize and generate new talent, the most important of the aforementioned key elements for the university are the first and the third, on which we will now concentrate further, discussing their goals, nature and first policies and results obtained since the new academic career was implemented in March 2007 upon approval by the Management Council. And it is precisely these two elements that constitute the hard

core of what we call «new academic career», divided into two different, unconnected stages, a first one encompassing research training and a second one of teaching staff consolidation.

Let us begin with the objectives and purposes to be met. The document approved by the Management Council specifically states some overall objectives and purposes to initiate a progressive process that will not conclude before the 2009-2010 academic year. The ultimate goal is to have as a university objectives and action lines that allow to define a realistic teaching career that does not jeopardise the future and is attractive enough to bring the best academic talent to the UAB. As to the intermediate objectives, the new career aims at:

- ▶ **Reducing the duration of the teaching career**, preventing stabilisation to occur at a high age.
- ▶ **Fostering a teaching and research career with a clear distinction between two stages of staff in training**: the first as a gateway to do the PhD and the second to consolidate permanent academic staff.
- ▶ **Reducing teaching dedication of staff in training**, avoiding the use of positions requiring much teaching dedication.
- ▶ **Fostering post-doctoral stages at centres of excellence**, where doctors trained at the UAB can continue their research training and get help to have access to the industry according to their qualification and expectations.
- ▶ **Reducing the recruitment of staff trained exclusively at the UAB**, fostering a culture of attracting talent from all over, opening recruitment to external lecturers and researchers and giving thus a significant relevance in the teaching career to doctors with a high-quality post-doctoral record outside the UAB.
- ▶ **Continuing the use of programmes such as Ramón y Cajal, Beatriu de Pinós** to attract young researchers that can later on consolidate in positions as a permanent professor at the university.

A diagram (chart 1) will allow to explain clearly what this new teaching career means and how it works given the Spanish and Catalan context.

As the model shows, dedication to research needs to be intense in the first stage, which lasts approximately four years, and thus there will be few teaching tasks. Besides, to ensure equal opportunities, labour conditions of PhD students need to be similar. Hence the university has decided to use a single contract system in this initial stage called research staff in training (RST), thus avoiding the use of assistant or collaborating professors. RST labour conditions are very similar to those of research staff trainees, which also fosters equal opportunities as the main task of both is to do their PhD thesis.

As we will see later, what has been done is to unify the profile of research staff in training, by which the UAB has been offering in practical terms one single kind of positions in this area since May 2007, bringing together the offer of own and other grants.

Defining a realistic teaching career does not jeopardise the future and is attractive enough to bring the best academic talent to the UAB.

As the diagram shows, new doctors need to start a post-doctoral stage outside the UAB upon completing their thesis. Put in different terms, they enter the labour market and continue their training with an approximately two-year post-doctoral stage at a research centre or another university. As the Management Council asked for, this scheme will be easier to implement if the UAB searches partnerships with other universities to create coordinated post-doctoral grant programmes for its new doctors. This is precisely one thing that has been pushed with the «4 Universities» partnership by the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Autonomous University of Madrid, the Carlos III University and the Pompeu Fabra University.

The second stage starts with the lecturer profile (assistant doctor according to the University Act), who is expected to take over a much bigger teaching task while completing their research training until achieving the necessary merits enabling them to run for a position as a permanent professor at the university. Of course, nothing prevents in this stage that UAB doctors apply for selection tests after their post-doctoral stage in the industry or other universities and research centres.

Upon finishing their thesis, new doctors have to go on a post-doctoral stage outside the UAB.

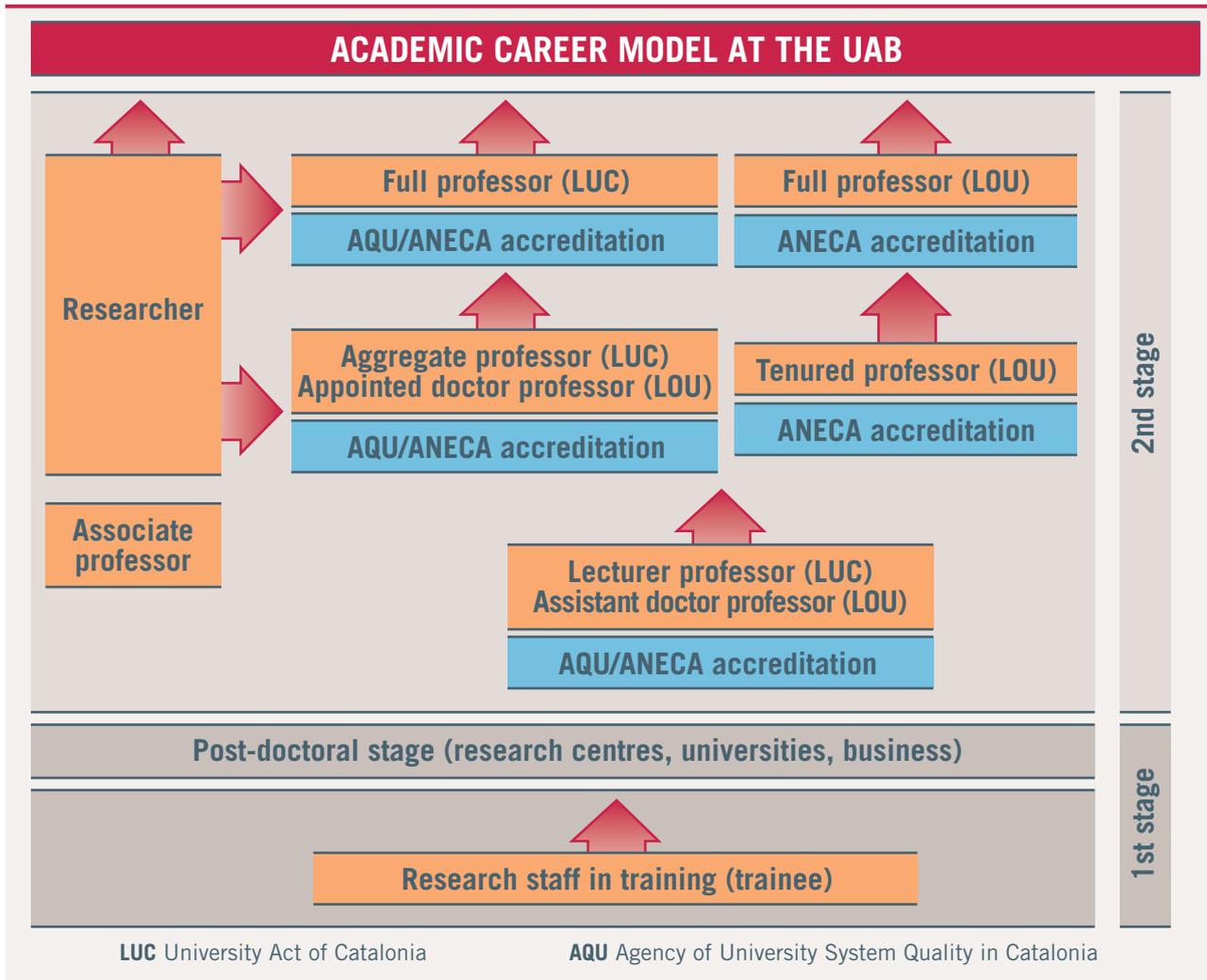
In this academic career model aimed at fostering talent and equal opportunities, recruitment is the key factor. This is why it is done at two crucial points: a) the stage in which researchers in training need to be chosen to enter programmes and PhD studies, and b) young researchers who will consolidate their academic career once they complete their training stage (doctorate and post-doctoral stage).

This was the purpose, intermediate or additional goals and the description of the nature and stages of the new teaching career. Let us now talk about the results obtained since its implementation in 2006-2007.

The UAB started hiring RST in the 2006-2007 academic year to replace former assistants and associates, in a process agreed with the departments. To do so, a specific, internationally advertised call was organised by which more than 270 vacancies were offered throughout the university for two years, the data of which are available (2006-2007 and 2007-2008). Very active institutional advertisement and promotion campaigns have made sure a much higher demand, with over 3500 applications.

The result has been a very diverse group of applicants and a final selection of PhD students ensuring talent (academic record) and a big diversity of origins. Today, after two editions of the

Chart 1. Academic career model at the UAB



RST vacancy programme, 40% of PhD students within the programme have graduated from a Catalan university, 15% from elsewhere in Spain and 45% from a foreign university.

Besides, the UAB has set up different programmes addressed at doctors to complete their post-doctoral training. The first is a doctor mobility programme (through an agreement with the other three aforementioned universities of the «4 Universities» partnership) that has enabled us to offer altogether twelve vacancies for young doctors from signatory universities. The second programme is precisely the offer of post-doctoral positions at the UAB. More precisely,

24 post-doctoral vacancies for a two-year stage have been on offer in the last two years. Results are significant and pointed into the expected direction: over 50% of doctors having obtained the position graduated from foreign universities, 25% from Catalan and another 25% from Spanish universities.

In conclusion, the results seem to indicate a positive progression. The Autonomous University of Barcelona has been traditionally characterised for its decided drive for internationalisation, search of excellence and talent attraction as well as its social engagement. Academic staff policies carried out in recent years, with the new

academic career at their heart, start yielding positive results, attracting promising youth both to start their life in research and to continue after their PhD. We are convinced that these people, spending some time away from our campuses, will provide all the necessary talent to nourish the staff of our and other universities as well as different research centres, companies and organisations in the future.

There is a lot at stake for our university and our country. We know that we still have a long way

ahead of us to attract talent and improve our universities. On this way, the new academic career will definitely be an important landmark. As to difficulties, perhaps two quotations may come in handy that have been guiding the work at the UAB for years, combining pragmatism and a decided will of change. First comes a paraphrase of the Catalan poet Martí i Pol: «Neither all is done nor is all possible, at least in the short term.» The second is from Isaiah Berlin: «We only can do what is possible to do, but it needs to be done at any rate.»

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