

Incentivising academics: Experiences and expectations of the tenure track in Finland

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Abstract

Research has shown that a tenure track incorporates both commitment and control aspects: the career system offers junior-level academics long-term job prospects, but subjects them to performance control. This study complements existing research on tenure track positions, which has mostly been conducted in northern America. Universities in Finland have established new organisation-specific tenure track systems. Drawing on interviews with academics working in tenure track positions, this study elucidates the inconsistencies and tensions academics feel during their career, the criteria they interpret as being emphasised in promotion, and their experiences in combining work and private lives. While academics were formally encouraged to excel in various areas, the study found that academics interpreted the tenure track as emphasising research performance and success in acquiring research funding. The study concludes that career systems encourage academics to adopt entrepreneurial mindsets and makes the individual responsible for their own career progress.

Keywords: tenure track, academic career, universities, new public management, performance criteria

Introduction

How will my career progress? What activities should I prioritise? How much of my personal life do I have to sacrifice to pursue a career? These are questions that academics have to consider when trying to establish a career while also trying to maintain a manageable work–life balance. The questions become tangible when moving along a university career path that is characterised by fixed-term contracts and performance evaluations. In the realm of career studies (Khapova and Arthur 2011), this study focuses on the work experiences of individuals in a certain social structure – tenure track positions at two Finnish universities.

In neoliberal universities, academics have become objects of scrutiny, and are subjected to continuous measurement and pressures not only to do well, but also to excel (Pitt and Mewburn 2016; Knights and Clarke 2014; Acker et al. 2012). As Finnish higher education today is

increasingly positioned in an international context characterised by rankings and comparisons, the Nordic ideal of equality has given way to ideals of competition and efficiency in the policy discourse, affecting the work of academics (see Kallio et al. 2016; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013).

Universities aim to influence the work of academics with incentive structures. The incentive structures are complemented with demands and expectations stemming from groups such as students and external agencies (Ogbonna and Harris 2004; Evans 2015). Overall, the content and nature of academic work are confronted with multiple, diversified, even partly conflicting expectations (e.g., Ylijoki 2013; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Rice and Sorcinelli 2002; Mäntylä 2007).

Academic career progression forms a complex system involving multiple actors. In this system, academics themselves typically operate in powerful roles, for example as reviewers and evaluators. Thus, they cannot merely be regarded as targets of management systems. The expectations and demands emerging within and outside universities have to be balanced with the ideals of scholarly communities and academics' ideas about meaningful work (cf. Mäntylä 2007). Of interest is how the pluralistic expectation and demand structures are reflected in tenure track performance criteria. It is also worth investigating how academics working in such systems in a specific societal context weigh the significance of these criteria.

This study focuses on the contradictions of tenure track employment, materialised around questions such as what should I be doing, how will I be evaluated, and when have I achieved enough. The study complements existing research on tenure track which has predominantly been conducted in northern America (e.g., Acker et al. 2012; Rice and Sorcinelli 2002; Forthergill and Feltey 2003). The empirical analysis builds on unique interview data with assistant and associate professors working in newly established tenure track systems in Finland.

The Finnish context provides a fruitful arena for research, as Finnish universities acquired the status as employer organisations from the start of 2010. The launch of output-oriented tenure track systems is a continuation of the reforms in Finnish academia, inspired by new public management (NPM) ideals of efficiency, monitoring and control (cf. Power 1999). These reforms have affected not only the institutional level of universities, but also the work of academics, which is now subjected to metrics (Kallio et al. 2016). Whereas the government influence on Finnish universities has relied on performance management since the 1990s (Kuoppala 2005), the pressures for more competition and efficiency were encapsulated in a new Universities Act in 2010. The Act stressed

market logic and made universities employer organisations, seen as providing leverage in improving the universities' competitiveness (e.g., Ministry of Education and Culture 2010).

Instead of perceiving the career systems as solely neutral and accomplishments-based, tenure track employment is approached in this article as a site of political struggle in which recruitment and promotion criteria and policies of work–ife balance become tangible. The aim of the study is to make the following contributions. First, the study presents analysis of the criteria the academics believe are emphasised in the tenure track system. By doing that, it produces an account of what academics interpret they are expected to focus on in professorship (cf. Evans 2015) and illuminates the roles in society the incentive structures encourage academics to adopt. Second, the study highlights the many ambivalences of the career system that emerge when academics in privileged, yet vulnerable tenure track positions (Brunila 2016) weigh and compromise on the significance of different tasks, yet retaining their notions of academic ethos. The study also provides insights into the tensions of balancing work and private life within academia.

Contradictions of tenure track

Tenure track is an academic career system which has its origins in the US, a vast academic labour market. Tenure track is characterised by fixed-term contracts and step-by-step promotion (usually with the hierarchical steps of assistant professorship, associate professorship, and full professorship) until the final, conditional stage of academic tenure.

Several European universities, such as the Swiss ETH Zurich and the Dutch Leiden University, have recently developed their own tenure track models. In Europe, tenure track systems have been perceived as being fruitful when developing long-term career paths for academics with a PhD. Still, the use of such models is currently at an early stage and the systems vary considerably between countries and between universities (see LERU 2014).

Between control and commitment

Based on previous research, tenure track operates between two contrasts: commitment and control. The first, 'soft' approach to the system emphasises the mutual commitment between the university and the academic in developing a lasting trust-based relationship and the beneficial consequences of retaining permanent employment in academia. These consequences include guarantee of the fulfilment of academic freedom and protection of academics from prevailing political, economic, and ideological interests (e.g., Herbert and Tienari 2013; McPherson and Schapiro 1999).

In a situation in which the Finnish government has reduced the budget of universities, the few new staff who are recruited with governmental block grants may be perceived as universities' 'core workers' when viewed from the core–periphery continuum (de Cuyper et al. 2009). Despite their official status as fixed-term workers, according to the study of Herbert and Tienari (2013), tenure track academics at one Finnish university were considered to be members of a privileged elite.

The second, 'hard' approach to the career system is to see it as an instrument to 'discipline academics' with performance measurement and constant evaluation (Acker et al. 2012; cf. Knights and Clarke 2014). Influenced by NPM, the market context has introduced universities in many countries to targets and ideals, such as efficiency in the form of financial and performance measurement and control, and accountability in the form of audits and evaluation (e.g., Rhoades and Sporn 2002; Bleiklie 1998). These market ideals have been incorporated into the performance management systems of universities, aiming to objectivate the performance and activities of academics with the use of indicators (Kallio et al. 2016; cf. Courpasson 2000).

By detailing the appropriate contributions one should make in a given timeframe, promotion and tenure reviews in tenure track represent increased scrutiny of academic work. Having the capacity to define the terms for the continuance of contracts and to discontinue them provides universities with an opportunity to enact management techniques which emphasise productivity (cf. Morley 2003). Thus, the implementation of career systems may be used as a leverage to support neoliberal ideas of competition and individualism (cf. Nikunen 2012).

The ideal of total commitment to work, which implicitly assumes that private life should not affect work, corresponds with managerialist aims at universities (Lund 2012). High demands and expected long working hours may be problematic for anyone, but this is especially so for assistant and associate professors with children. In particular, female scholars with children have experienced tenure track employment, which often coincides with the potential years for family formation, as problematic (see Forthergill and Feltey 2003; Acker et al. 2012).

Tenure track offers individuals tempting, yet incomplete prospects of a career: after the probationary period, the candidates considered to be good enough are promoted or granted tenure. Despite the goal of permanent employment, tenure track is often a rigid career path with few time-outs, high efficiency pressures, and the chance of failure in evaluations. This means the academics have to work hard to show their applicability for the position and promotion. As the rhythm of

academic work has speeded up, the need to perform multiple tasks may be connected with continuous concern about lagging behind (Ylijoki 2013; Rice and Sorcinelli 2002). In the US, tenure track employment has been coupled with work overload (e.g., Rice et al. 2000).

On the other hand, job resources, such as social support and supervisor feedback, may buffer high job demands in employment relationships (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Promotion prospects in tenure track represent favourable job resources that are lacking in project-based academic employment. McDonald and Makin (2000), who found a connection between fixed-term employment and high job satisfaction, rationalise that fixed-term employees may anticipate a permanent job in the employing organisation. Similarly, tenure track may be seen as a stepping-stone, although an insecure one, to permanent full professorship.

Multiple demands towards academic work

Recruitment and evaluation criteria are integral parts of universities' career systems: for their own part, they influence which individuals will achieve the highest positions in academia and for which activities. In contemporary universities, academics are faced with high and contradictory pressures constrained by limited time (and financial) resources (Ylijoki 2013; Rice and Sorcinelli 2002).

Based on a study of job descriptions at Australian universities, Pitt and Mewburn (2016) conclude that Australian university employers seek 'academic superheroes' who excel not only in research and teaching, but who also actively participate in less traditional areas, such as student marketing. The demands are high as early career scholars are also expected to master a variety of academic tasks. Based on their analysis, Rice and Sorcinelli (2002, 104) similarly conclude that junior academics are 'uncomfortably squeezed between local and cosmopolitan pressures, and between disciplinary colleagues and institutional demands'. In addition, the study by Evans (2015) on the expectations that non-professorial academics have of professors presents a multiplicity of expectations, which vary from scholarly leadership to mentoring and advising junior scholars. Fulfilling all the expectations may be impossible, as it seems to require 'superhuman capacity' (Evans 2015, 677).

In the US, research productivity plays a significant role in tenure track evaluations (Rice and Sorcinelli 2002; Wolverton 1998; cf. Pitt and Mewburn 2016). Lund's interpretation (2012; cf. Herbert and Tienari 2013) is that in the prevailing management discourse, a constructed ideal academic is an internationally oriented scholar who produces journal publications in high impact

journals. At the same time, due to the perception of students as customers (Ogbonna and Harris 2004), achievements in the scholarship of teaching have come under scrutiny through the increased use of student and peer evaluations (Wolverton 1998). Despite the attempts to improve the status of teaching, teaching excellence does not necessarily influence recruitment and promotion decisions (Parker 2008). As universities' prestige and legitimacy are increasingly connected with 'research excellence' (Hazelkorn 2009), even in the European context the career systems may be expected to emphasise research productivity.

In addition, several general-level merits, such as international scholarly experience, mobility and networks (Herbert and Tienari 2013), achievements in attracting external funds (Klawitter 2015) and engagement with public and private partners and the wider society (Rice and Sorcinelli 2002), have increased in importance in recruitment.

Aside from the demands on specific spheres of work, academics in the tenure track are encouraged to present themselves as a *particular kind of academic*: as productive, collaborative tireless selves who are capable of performing multiple tasks and reaching the high standards set for new assistant professors (Brunila 2016). According to Williams (1999, 230), academic tenure encapsulates the distinctive affective conditions of the professional position, such as job security, the pride and anxiety involved in the profession. Interestingly, the universities' demands of new recruits go as far as to encompass spheres of personal qualities, such as sociability and teamwork spirit (Pitt and Mewburn 2016, 95). In an article based on her own experiences as a tenure track assistant professor, Brunila (2016) reflects on the pressures to present herself as autonomous and responsible in the face of tenure track recruitment and evaluations. In the position, one is required to perform a leadership function, and to balance between one's own ideals about academic work and what others see as successful professorship.

The Finnish context

With its 14 universities and c. 16,500 full-time equivalent research and teaching personnel (in 2015), Finland has a comparatively small academic labour market. This means that many academics wishing to work in Finland for personal or other reasons have few academic employment alternatives. Furthermore, the current government (2015–) has reduced the level of government funding of universities and national research funding agencies, which is likely to lead to intensified competition for the vacant positions and grants. The cuts have resulted in layoffs at several universities, including the case universities selected for this study.

In 2016, c. 70% of academics at Finnish universities had fixed-term contracts (Association of Finnish Independent Education Employers 2016, 8). This is a high figure compared to the national equivalent – 15.4% of all employees (Statistics Finland 2016). In Finland, labour legislation is based on permanent contracts: fixed-term contracts have to be justified by a legally acceptable cause, such as substituting for a permanent employee who is on parental leave. The large share of external research and development (R&D) funding – c. 49% of all R&D funding in 2015 (1.3 billion euros; Vipunen Database 2016) – might partly explain the high levels of project-based employment. Still, nearly one-quarter of all professors at research universities worked in fixed-term contracts, and their average salary was lower when compared to permanent professors (Finnish Union of University Professors 2015). In Finland, tenure track positions offer junior-level academics new career prospects. Still, the limited size of the academic labour market and the regulated employment system make tenure track employment somewhat problematic.

Apart from the tenure track and a minor use of teaching-oriented career tracks, the majority of academics in Finland do not find themselves on any formalised career path. Tenure track recruitment covers only a small minority of all vacant positions (Välilmaa et al. 2016). Overall, academics working at Finnish universities find their career prospects to be insecure (Siekkinen et al. 2015). The significance of the tenure track relates to universities' ambition to broaden its use in professorial recruitment (Academy of Finland 2014, 9).

Other than the initiative of identifying the four stages of an academic career (Ministry of Education and Culture 2008), there is little national coordination related to academic employment tracks. Thus, the recruitment and promotion systems may vary between universities: universities as independent employers may choose the kinds of employment tracks, if any, they wish to introduce. Despite increased financial and institutional autonomy, the Universities Act continues to regulate the recruitment of professorial-level staff to some extent. For example, professors can be recruited either with an open call or by invitation without public notice of vacancy, if the invited academic is 'an academically distinguished person' or if the position is non-permanent. Within some constraints, each university in Finland may decide on the details of tenure track procedures, such as which actors to involve in recruitment and which promotion criteria to apply.

Data and method

This study draws on interviews with assistant and associate professors. Interviews and qualitative analysis of them were selected in order to gain an understanding of the experiences and

interpretations of academics working in the new career systems. It was assumed that the narrative descriptions of academics would enable an understanding of the various demands of academic work in general, and work in the tenure track in particular.

The interviewees were selected from two Finnish universities which had already recruited a number of tenure track academics. The universities chose to launch the career systems in 2010, from when the national university reform was implemented. The main rationales for introducing a tenure track were to attract a wider pool of competitive junior candidates in a global academic labour market and to use it for reallocating resources within the university. In adopting a tenure track system, the case universities positioned themselves as competitors in the global academic and research market. The final content of the systems is a mixture of both imported and national elements (e.g., tenure track being ‘more human’ than in the US) (Pietilä 2015).

Tenure track systems at both universities include fixed-term assistant professorship, fixed-term or permanent associate professorship, and permanent full professorship. The procedures and decision-making patterns have been described in another article (Pietilä 2015). At University A, tenure track is the predominant recruitment channel for professors (with some recruitment decisions being direct full professorships). University B has mainly recruited full professors and used tenure track as a parallel, minor route for recruiting professors, but it is increasing the proportion of tenure track recruitment.

The interviewees included 15 assistant professors and 6 associate professors. At the time of the interviews (in 2015), 3 had a permanent position, and 18 had a contract of three to five years. The interviewees included 15 men and 6 women, and 13 Finns and 8 non-Finns. Interviewees from various academic fields were approached to ensure inclusion of those who work mostly individually and those who work with research groups with implications for the nature of work, such as publishing, funding, and administrative work. The fields encompassed natural sciences, technology, social sciences, and business studies.¹

The interviewees were on average 39 years old and had 1.3 children (with an average age of six years). All but two were in a stable relationship. On average, the interviewees had obtained their PhD eight years prior to the interview and the majority already had extensive research and teaching experience.

The interviews concerned themes such as the academic's work history and career aspirations; relationship with the university as an employer; recruitment, promotion and tenure criteria; academics' expectations in the employment relationship; and work–life balance. After transcription, analysis of the data started with reading through the interviews several times. Then, extracts from all the interviews related to recruitment, promotion and tenure criteria and work–life balance were identified, coded and systematised with the Atlas.ti software programme. Furthermore, focus was placed on the insecurities experienced and the inconsistencies in tenure track that were perceived. The quotes selected aim to give the reader the opportunity to assess the plausibility of the interpretations.

Findings

Entering the unknown

As Finnish universities have traditionally lacked tenure track systems, many interviewees described their experience of having entered the new position without knowing exactly what it entailed. Despite the implicit messages on high rates of favourable tenure decisions following time in a tenure track, insecurity was present in many forms, such as in being unclear of performance criteria, being unaware of forthcoming evaluations, the large number of actors involved in the decisions, universities' budget cuts and their effects on future employment.

However, tenure track also meant open competitive calls, and in most cases included at least some explicit criteria for promotion, academic freedom, long-term career prospects and stability. These were seen to surpass the available alternatives of project-based employment. This underpins the typical closed academic recruitment traditions and incomplete work conditions as one's baseline.

[...] although these [positions] are fixed-term – there's always evaluation and it's possible that this career path will be discontinued – still this gives a perspective in a totally different way to what you're heading towards and the opportunity to commit in the university and the future.
(male, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

The status attached to an assistant professor position seemed to differ between units and the case universities. Many academics especially at University A recalled having been 'treated as professor' as they entered the institution. This was pronounced by salary increases, start-up packages, and invitations to attend prestigious conferences and administrative committees. At University B with a fewer number of tenure track recruitment, the status of the new position was less clear. Tenure as a constant marker of status (Williams 1999, 233) was sometimes used in the work community to distinguish unequal groups of staff from one another. For example, the position of assistant

professor was referred to with dismissive expressions, such as ‘professor for beginners’, ‘assistant’, or ‘pretend professor’.

The globally spread neoliberal ideals of competition further strengthen the divide between academic high-fliers and others (cf. Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). Tenure track may be used to indicate hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion between full professors and ‘incomplete’ ones, but also between tenure track professors and the majority who are left outside any career path (cf. Kimber 2003; Herbert and Tienari 2013).

Weighing the significance of different demands

Employment in a tenure track position meant having to be in control of multiple tasks. Described as being highly output-oriented and ‘*metric-oratic*’ (compared to meritocratic) towards the number and quality of international journal publications, students graduated and funding obtained, tenure track encouraged the academics to distinguish carefully between recognised (most notably research) and unrecognised tasks (such as committee work and conference organising). Thus, performance management indicators in tenure track positions led to prioritisation and time management: ‘[...] in my previous positions, I’ve never been so aware of what I’m expected to do: what kinds of contributions and also how many’.

With the focus on developing one’s own career, tenure track may encourage one to adopt an individualistic career strategy with detrimental effects on collegial tasks (cf. Clarke and Knights 2015). On the other hand, through the involvement in curriculum development and supervision of students, tenure track may also increase commitment to the closest work community.

Several academics reflected on the continuous feeling of insufficiency. It resulted not only from the universities’ extensive performance criteria, but also from one’s own high demands and self-assessment with regard to international colleagues’ research record. Based on the interviews, continuous striving and high performance expectations seem to be normalised as natural parts of being involved in the global research competition. On the downside, when viewed on a global scale, one’s accomplishments rarely reach the top scores which the excellence discourse pressures one to pursue. Together with methods of self-surveillance, the internalised feeling of insufficiency operates as a powerful pacemaker to fare better.

You can always think that you could do more. There’s always somebody who fares better. Often we think about ourselves compared to foreign colleagues and friends. And someone has published

three items last year in a good journal and I have none. Then I feel like I can and I should be able to do more. (male, social sciences/business studies, permanent contract)

In the universities' guidelines, tenure track decisions were portrayed as being based on holistic evaluations. Most importantly, the guidelines stress the candidate's research and teaching performance and potential. These criteria are followed by service and outreach activities, and some additional areas, such as internationalisation and external funds.

Despite the formal criteria, all interviewees at both universities consistently assessed that they would be evaluated mainly on research performance, typically interpreted as refereed publications in prestigious international journals, the number and type of citations, and promising on-going work.

I think that regardless of what it says [about the performance criteria], I think after all research is what makes the difference. [...] I think the publications have the greatest weight, unless somebody is especially focused on teaching only. Which should in principle be possible according to the guidelines, but I doubt whether somebody who does so is able to proceed. (male, natural sciences/technology, fixed-term contract)

Although several interviewees noted that teaching and the supervision of students were becoming more and more scrutinised (cf. Ogbonna and Harris 2004; Wolverton 1998), teaching performance was seen to escape visible, 'objective' measures, except for the number of graduating students and courses taught. Although the universities' performance criteria emphasised both research and teaching, in practice teaching was seen as constantly being left in the shadow of research. This bias can be interpreted as an unintended consequence of NPM and its emphasis on measurable outputs (Power 1999).

In addition to research productivity, the academics in infrastructure-intensive fields in particular interpreted the external funds obtained as being significant for career progression. Also, some more individually oriented academics reported that they applied for funds because they were now expected to lead big projects. In times of austerity, success in funding competitions was sometimes even seen as a prerequisite to fulfil universities' other demands, such as the requirement for tenure track academics to establish research groups and supervise PhD students. Apart from start-up packages, especially academics working on novel research areas at the employing university relied mostly on their own ability to attract money to establish even a small group.

-In which areas do you think you should especially succeed in order to advance in the career path? -Funding applications. My feeling was that when I got [...] the final decision for my European project, I felt as though I had been granted my position. (male, natural sciences/technology, fixed-term contract)

Having and leading a group was interpreted as a useful sign of academic leadership, also seen as a requirement for career progress. This suggests ideal tenure track academics are conceptualised as leaders of larger organisational teams (Pitt and Mewburn 2016). However, projects and teams are a double-edged sword as they open the avenue for yet more time-consuming responsibilities, such as other people's employment issues.

The universities' performance criteria also emphasised internationality in the form of scientific impact, collaboration, and mobility. For some individuals with families, the requirement for longer research visits was problematic because of caring responsibilities, emphasised by remarks that in the Nordic context, both parents are expected to take responsibility of domestic demands. This problematises the apparent neutrality of criteria and how they treat individuals positioned in different personal circumstances.

For me, it's been quite a challenging thing [longer international visits]. In a way it's quite absurd [the demand for long international visits], because I have been very international otherwise: I have already done international collaboration in publications and so on. But my family situation is such that it's quite difficult for me to organise longer times [abroad]. (female, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

Despite the calls that universities and academics should engage in more societal interaction, outreach activities were not perceived as crucial for career progression. Even the academics working in applied-oriented fields reported that the universities' incentives to collaborate with industry and public representatives were modest.

Whereas the universities' official recruitment criteria emphasised the candidates' performance and potential, several interviewees connected their own recruitment with the university's or unit's strategic positioning. Thus, for being eligible for recruitment, it may not be enough to be a productive scholar, but to conduct research in one of the university's research strengths (cf. Pitt and Mewburn 2016; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Bagilhole and Goode 2001). Also, going beyond one's tangible achievements, some academics reflected on demands to express certain personal characteristics in recruitment. The recruitment interviews were seen as occasion for interviewees to demonstrate their capacity with a range of academic functions, as well as showing one's passion about work and commitment to the university strategy and being an eager team player (cf. Pitt and Mewburn 2016). For some, the performativity pressures to present a certain kind of scholar were in conflict with one's personal identity that led to challenge one's working practices.

[... I've been wondering] whether I should be a really skilful networker and collaborator, really active, all the time organising stuff and applying for funding from here and there. I think I like to

focus on one thing at a time. And I don't do many things at the same time. I wonder if it's ok here or whether I should be somehow different. (female, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

Managing demands

The insecure tenure track position encouraged academics to adopt ambitious, goal-oriented strategies to fulfil the requirements. These strategies included working on several projects and papers simultaneously, collaborating with senior colleagues, and continuously applying for research funds. In the long term, broadening the tasks would contribute to personal development as a scholar with the necessary skills in a neoliberal university. As an assistant professor stated:

[...] it is more and more expected that you become a sort of a plant manager who scrapes together as much money as possible and as many employees as possible. (male, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

Ambiguous performance criteria seemed to encourage some fixed-term academics to push themselves to extreme limits. Some academics had fears of not being able to live up to the demands in a limited timeframe, resulting in work overload.

At least in my case, nobody has come to say that you're doing enough of this or that thing. You have to somehow assess it by yourself. And then of course what easily happens is that you're trying to do at least enough. And then of course stress accumulates quite a lot and perhaps even gratuitously. (male, natural sciences/technology, fixed-term contract)

The necessity for success was emphasised by the low number of equivalent positions in the academic labour market in Finland: unlike in the US, there would be few opportunities for tenure track dropouts. Still, compared to one's academic reference group, who worked in project-based employment, a tenure track provided more security.

While in a tenure track, the academic is overtly exposed to periodic evaluations. An academic in a vulnerable position may be 'a bit exploited, if there are tasks nobody else really wants to do', as an assistant professor stated, because one is obliged to comply with managerial demands. This highlights the inequality and power dynamics involved in the unbalanced employment relationship.

For some, life in tenure track felt like 'being pulled in every direction'. While the multiple expectations and high demands may be emotionally exhausting for the individual, the impression within the work community may be that of being in a privileged position with ample resources (cf. Herbert and Tienari 2013). This stands in contrast to one's own experiences.

When you've got like a huge amount of email and so much administration and all those criteria that you need to fill... It is, it is really emotionally exhausting. I've cut down quite a lot and I've changed as a person because of the job. [...] for me it's just like many demands and lots of stress and a lot that is at stake, and like fighting the whole time to have to watch my back. Whereas from

the outside it seems to be perceived as though I'm becoming arrogant and I think I'm better than everybody else and I have all these resources. (female, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

By focusing on each individual's achievements and pressure to deliver, tenure track renders the individual responsible for his/her career progress. This is in line with the neoliberal idea that individuals are responsible for their own lives, including employment and living. An assistant professor stated, 'It's largely up to whether I can get the potential out of me which they believe in.' At the same time, several academics, especially at University B, but to some extent also at University A, lacked job resources, such as sufficient supervisor feedback and administrative support (cf. Bakker and Demerouti 2007). In the neoliberal discourse of self-regulation, academics as 'autonomous entrepreneurs' are given freedom to deliver tangible results, while assigning them responsibility for career advancement (cf. Clarke and Knights 2015). In competitive academia, academics also seemed to embrace the individualistic career ethos and many stressed their detachment from particular institutional units.

Maintaining work–life balance

As tenure track was considered to require placing work at the centre of one's life, deliberation on the balance between work and other aspects of life was a continuous theme in the interviews. The responses reflected the individual situations and working habits of academics and spanned all the extremes between total commitment to work and making a sharp distinction between work and life (cf. Ylijoki 2013). Opportunities for remote work, flexible working hours and digital communication enabled the tailoring of one's individual working arrangements, but further complicated the chances to break free from work.

It would be really nice to have more real free time. But one barrier is as simple as email: it simply explodes in a few days if you don't go through it. So, you have the temptation to go through emails even on a one week's holiday. (female, natural sciences/technology, permanent contract)

Long working hours were not considered problematic, when the urge to do academic work, especially research, came internally from one's own motivation and enthusiasm. For these individuals, work in academia was a way of life and long hours were portrayed as one's own choice (cf. Ylijoki 2013, 248). On the other hand, ambiguous performance criteria and their specification during one's contract also affected the workload and led to long working hours.

I'll have the evaluation at the end of the year. I was quite surprised in spring when I heard what I'm expected to have achieved by then. Because it hadn't actually been specified. [...] Let's say I have to work hard until the end of the year. (female, social sciences/business studies, fixed-term contract)

The ideal of meritocratic career progression stands strong in academia (Bagilhole and Goode 2001; cf. Acker et al. 2012). For many interviewees, objectivity and neutrality implied individual characteristics or family situations should not affect recruitment and promotion decisions. Although the ideal subject in tenure track may be an individual with no carer responsibilities or major passions in life that distract from work (cf. Lund 2012), the majority of interviewees had children, in many cases infants. Some academics with family duties, including men and women, problematised the meritocratic ideal and its blindness to one's circumstances, which affect one's ability to work. These individuals either referred to changes in one's own family composition or reflected more broadly on how having children may affect career opportunities in academia. In a Nordic context, male interviewees particularly stated also their spouse had a career and the caring responsibilities were divided between the partners. For some, the family relations were further complicated by arrangements when one's family or partner lived in another city or country.

I haven't personally always had the chance to do as much as the situation would have sometimes demanded. [...] I've never really been able to do 12-hour days and 6-7 days [a week] for a longer period [...] Somebody else in a different part of the world, who is nevertheless in the same phase, one who doesn't have a family yet or can commit everything to work and do six days a week and 15 hours a day for a longer time... He/she gets a clear benefit [...]. How could evaluations take this into account or should they, can they take it into account? (male, natural sciences/technology, fixed-term contract)

Discussion and conclusion

This study has illustrated the experiences of academics employed in new tenure track systems at two Finnish universities. It argues that assistant and associate professors are exposed to a new kind of performance culture, which emphasises efficiency, tangible outputs, and evaluation. These ideals furthered by NPM reforms stress the need to show one's accomplishments in a neat format with the help of 'objective' indicators. While performance management in academia is not restricted only to academics employed in a tenure track (see e.g. Kallio et al. 2016), the very nature of the career system rests on performance evaluation through metrics or qualitative indicators. As this kind of performance culture in Finnish academia is somewhat new and largely un-established, it makes individual academics vulnerable to managerial whim. While tenure track may provide academics with a long-term career orientation, the ambiguity in processes and criteria opens up opportunities for managerial control, if any problems during the track were to materialise.

In Finland, each university is free to design and implement its own career paths. Because institutions and units may choose to emphasise different achievements in recruitment and promotion, tenure track systems could serve to promote the diversity of skills and capabilities.

Indeed, the university employers' expectations about assistant and associate professors were extensive. However, when looking more closely into the more significant areas as perceived by academics, research productivity and externally funded projects especially stood out. This suggests the career systems posit a somewhat narrow image of what it means to be a successful, modern academic who is offered explicit career prospects: (s)he is constructed as one who publishes articles in high-class international journals and leads large-scale research projects.

The emphasis on research performance reflects the globally spread research excellence policies (e.g., Hazelkorn 2009). As an associate professor noted, 'the expectations are internationally mostly the same'. Focus on external funds is a symptom of the yet strengthening competitive tendencies and diminishing budgets in higher education. At the same time, achievements in teaching and service risk remaining under-recognised, a finding not restricted to the Finnish context (e.g., Macfarlane 2005).

The academics' accounts of the areas that count in tenure track evaluations extended traditional notions of research and teaching contributions. The specification of tenure track positions according to the strategic areas of universities represent aspects that fall outside the evaluation of academics' accomplishments and underline universities as more complete entities. Furthermore, some interviewees reflected on how they were encouraged to demonstrate desirable personal characteristics in the job interviews. The strategic positioning of units and the weight given to personal characteristics suggest limits to the tenure track recruitment as a purely meritocratic system (cf. Bagilhole and Goode 2001).

Overall, assistant and associate professors perceived the performance evaluation and the competitive aspects inherent in tenure track as extensive, but 'fair' and 'reasonable'. According to the neoliberal ethos, academics are pushed to undertake the attitude of a skilful entrepreneur, while the individualistic success/failure discourse shifts the judgements on work continuation to their own performance. However, tenure track performance lists provide examples of 'perfect selves' and may lead to pressures to perform like a superhuman academic who devotes nearly all of their life to work (cf. Pitt and Mewburn 2016). As an assistant professor stated, it may be 'emotionally exhausting' to try to constantly achieve, while still adapting to the new unit. As Acker et al. (2012) found, tenure track even in its gentler form puts a lot of pressure and a heavy workload on individuals. The heaviest pressures seemed to be experienced by academics with fewer accomplishments, many of whom had small children, which limits the option to work long hours.

Ambiguous performance criteria, risks of work overload, and difficulties in finding a work–life balance reported here have been found to be problems in tenure track in other studies also (e.g., Rice and Sorcinelli 2002; Acker et al. 2012). Although the aim of this article was not to compare the experiences of academics according to the employing university, it should be pointed out that academics at University A were in general more satisfied with the recruitment and promotion processes, orientation, communication, and administrative and collegial support than at University B. This is significant, because high job demands combined with dysfunctional management or insufficient support may result in strain (Bakker and Demerouti 2007).

Still, the majority of interviewees rejoiced in having a tenure track position. In the Finnish academic context, the contracts are relatively long with formal steps for promotion and tenure. When compared with precarious employment in academia, tenure track was generally seen as more transparent and predictable than the alternatives available. Interpreted through the lens of the relative deprivation theory (Crosby 1976), one could state that academics per se compare their working conditions to those of the referents – the academic community, and not to the wider population of employees, who are entitled to more stability through permanent positions.

It should still be noted that the job security / insecurity is a subjective feeling and may be related to one's position in the labour market, ability and willingness to be mobile, and the characteristics of one's academic field. As Williams (1999, 230) notes, work and life in tenure track is felt in personal ways, registering more general hopes and fears, ambitions and angers. As Evans (2015, 682) has remarked, no single archetype of a professor can be recognised. Work in tenure track is individual and specific, where the personal experiences, expectations, and personal situations come into play.

This study highlights the experiences of a limited number of tenure track professors at two Finnish universities. With the help of register-based data, future studies could trace the career trajectories of tenure track academics to find out whether their careers differ from those of the rest of the academic body, and how. As tenure track professors are progressing in their career in a specific social community, more research on the significance of work community support is needed (cf. Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Future research should also consider the gender implications of tenure track.

Universities can use these findings to develop more flexible career systems, so that they recognise a range of areas of performance and make allowance for the specific situations of individuals. At the policy level, the study cautions against building incentive structures that spur universities to develop

one-sided career models. It also remarks on the problematic situation in sustaining career systems that rely on rules different from those common in working life outside universities.

Endnotes

¹ The interviewees comprised a theoretical sample (non-probability sample). They were selected from a list that included all tenure track academics in the chosen organisational subunits of the case universities. The organisational units represented individually oriented and group-based (infrastructure-intensive) fields, and basic and application-oriented fields. The interviewees were chosen to represent individuals in different career phases, and nationalities, and genders. Diversity of academic fields and career phases were prioritised over other classifications. The main goal of theoretical sampling was to maximise the variety of contextual factors.

² To protect the anonymity of interviewees, I have not specified the exact academic fields or the working units of individuals. For the same reason, in the quotes I have indicated the academic fields of the interviewees only broadly by referring either to natural sciences/technology or social sciences/ business studies.

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