Retirement: Sticking around “Academics who delay retirement could create roadblocks for early-career researchers”

Graeme Hugo, a demographer at the University of Adelaide, Australia, doesn't mince his words. He says Australia has inadvertently created a 'lost generation' of academics: those under 40 years old. Hugo says that the academic workforce is now dominated by baby boomers who were hired in droves during university expansions in the late 1960s. More than half of the academic workforce is over 50 years old, so he expects 40% of academics and lecturers to retire over the next decade. But this is not the ideal situation for young academics it seems to be. Faculty members are delaying their retirement and, increasingly, vacated permanent posts are divided into contractual, non-tenure-track jobs. Tired of navigating the stream of temporary posts, nearly 40% of Australian academics under the age of 30 plan to leave academia or the country, according to a survey conducted last September (see http://go.nature.com/rnhl4w).

“The old academic system — the romantic notion of sitting at your desk pondering the nature of the Universe — is gone,” says one of the survey's authors Emmaline Bexley, a social scientist at the University of Melbourne. Her results bolster a growing concern that the best and brightest will, increasingly, avoid the insecure, underpaying jobs that seem to dominate academia. Australia's academic workforce woes are acute, but they also illustrate how chronic global trends are making it increasingly difficult for young academics to establish independent research careers. "Postponed retirement and a general increase in life expectancy, coupled with the continuing shift towards more non-tenure-track and part-time positions, are producing a discouraging situation for entry-level faculty,” says John Curtis, director of research and public policy at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in Washington DC. The huge turnover once expected from baby-boomer retirements doesn't look likely to happen. “Even when academics retire, universities do not necessarily replace tenure-track lines in a one-to-one ratio,” says Paula Stephan, who studies the economics of science at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

The proportion of teaching staff with full-time tenure-track jobs in the United States has dropped by more than half, from 16.1% in 1975 to 7.6% in 2009, according to AAUP data (see 'Employment status of US university teaching staff'). Conversely, the number of full-time non-tenure-track faculty members rose by just under half, from 10.3% to 15.1%. The proportion of part-time faculty members hit a peak of 41.1% in 2009. Early-career researchers need to be aware that demographics will shape their prospects of a permanent post in academia. For some, non-tenure-track posts, despite
concerns about poor job security, offer a viable option and a welcome level of freedom. Others may want to re-evaluate their academic ambitions.

**Arrested retirement**

Baby boomers will eventually retire. But the predicted retirements may come in a series of swells rather than the surge expected with mandatory retirement, which ended in the United States in 1994. “The pipeline isn't emptying like administrations thought it would,” says Cathy Trower, director of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at the Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some academics predict that there will be little turnover of tenured positions in the next two decades. “There is not going to be any massive wave of retirements for a while — we've got 20 years to wait for the anaconda bulge of baby boomers to work itself out,” says Frances Rosenbluth, deputy provost for social sciences and faculty development at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

There are exceptions. Administrators at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, for example, have taken the unusual step of launching a campaign to raise US$100 million to recruit new faculty members before the expected onslaught of retirements. US federal government agencies, many of which also have an ageing workforce, are preparing for future retirement needs. For example, the US Office of Naval Research in Arlington, Virginia, anticipating the retirements, continues to develop its young-investigator program, this year up to $8.5 million to attract researchers.

The recession has only exacerbated a growing trend towards deferring retirements; no one expects a retirement boom, even if the economy improves. The Higher Education Generational Survey, conducted by Versta Research for Fidelity Investments in Boston, Massachusetts, a financial-services corporation that provides retirement savings plans for people employed in the higher-education sector, found that more than half of faculty respondents expect to delay retirement or to never retire. Similarly, a survey of faculty aged 60 years and older by retirement-planning company Teachers Insurance Annuity Association and College Retirement Equities Fund in New York, published in December 2011, found that 60% of respondents would like to and expect to work past the conventional retirement age of 65. And 15% of the respondents say that they will have to continue working past the age of 65 because of financial concerns. “It's a real concern if this 15%, the ones who want to retire but don't feel they can financially, starts to increase — because that has the potential to become a workforce-management issue,” says Valerie Conley, a higher-education researcher at Ohio University in Athens.

In the United Kingdom, the latest figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency in Cheltenham indicate that the number of faculty members aged over 65 at higher-education institutions with science faculty members increased from 970 in 2006 to 1,375 in 2010, a jump of almost 42%. That number is likely to increase, especially if proposed government plans to cut public-sector pension benefits go through. “Changes in pensions could make retiring at a point you might otherwise want less accessible — and in turn that means posts are not as vacant as they might otherwise have been,” says Sally Hunt, general secretary of the University and College Union in London.

**Workforce repercussions**

The University of California, Berkeley, exemplifies what happens when an institution with an excellent benefits package repeals its mandatory retirement age: there is no incentive to leave. The number of older faculty members has grown exponentially since 1994; out of about 1,500 faculty members, 75 are older than 70 years, according to Marc Goulden, director of data initiatives at the university. As the number of older faculty members has risen, the number of young tenure-track faculty members has fallen: in 1980, roughly 16% of the faculty members were under 35 years old; just 6% were in this age bracket in 2011.

The economic downturn has made finding ways to encourage retirement a hot topic on US campuses where budgets are tight. “The question taking shape seems to be, 'what do we have to do to get them to go?', but that's the wrong focus,” says Goulden. “We can't get them to go now that mandatory retirement no longer exists; we have to build a fluid, flexible system where older faculty can contribute to the university, perhaps even electing to turn over their tenure-track line for another position that is mutually beneficial to all.”

Phased-retirement schemes — such as a reduction in the workload over a three-year period in exchange for a commitment to leave — are having the most success in encouraging retirement. Such schemes were in place at 32% of US campuses in 2006, according to an AAUP survey by Conley conducted in 2007 on the changes in faculty retirement policies. Such schemes seem to ease faculty members into the transition towards retirement, and help administrators to manage the campus workforce, says Claire van Ummersen, a senior adviser for the American Council on Education, an organization in Washington DC that represents more than 1,600 campuses.

But with increasing student enrolment, universities are relying more on contract staff to teach. “The increase in universities’ use of contingent faculty members to teach is a sign that the trinity of teaching, research and service is breaking down,” says Martin Finkelstein, from the department of education leadership, management and policy at Seton
Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. He says that one emerging reconfiguration of faculty functions is a move towards limited-contract faculty members who teach or conduct research.

Taking a contract position at a ‘dream’ university, just to get a foot in the door, may be tempting, but may not be the best decision for someone who is eager and able to hold out for a tenure-track post. “Most people who start out in contract appointments stay in contract appointments,” says Finkelstein.

For young academics, the most frustrating thing is the lack of job security that comes with fixed contracts. “The huge numbers of staff on short-term contracts remains one of the great secrets of UK higher education, and we must do more to support staff who find themselves continuing to operate without decent job security even after years of training and work within higher education,” says Hunt.

Tenure-free will
Efforts are afoot to improve job security. In 2008, campuses in the United Kingdom, for example, started implementing the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, coordinated by Britain's research councils, to establish standards for research staff on fixed-term contracts. “There is a move towards universities providing open contracts for research staff, moving away from fixed-term contracts,” says Janet Metcalfe, director of Vitae, an organization in London supporting doctoral researcher career development. The number of fixed-term contracts in the United Kingdom has declined in recent years — from 43.2% of positions in 2004 to 33.3% in 2010, according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (see http://go.nature.com/o9xg2c). Some institutions, including University College London and the University of Bristol, have publicly stated their intentions to move away from fixed-term contracts.

There are also moves to create new types of non-tenure-track positions — particularly at medical schools. Van Ummersen says that medical schools are filled with full-time non-tenure-track positions; mainly clinicians who teach and conduct research. Typically, staff are hired through the hospital, rather than by the medical school or university, to keep pace with the hospital workload. The positions come with promotional opportunities, but unlike tenure-track positions, they carry no penalty if the requirements of promotion are not achieved. The University of California's outgoing provost, Lawrence Pitts, expects that universities will follow suit and create different types of faculty positions to meet the needs of the institution. But, given their traditional conservative approach to faculty governance, those changes will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, he says.

Trower says that not having to worry about tenure can give researchers certain freedoms. “Junior faculty members often don't take as many risks if they need publications to get tenure,” she says. She suggests that breakthrough science often comes from places such as interdisciplinary centers at universities, which, unlike departments, are typically filled with non-tenure track positions. “Young scholars tell me that they are happy on non-tenure-track lines because they have a life and a sense of balance,” says Trower. Goulden's data on why early-career researchers elect to leave academia bolsters this idea (M. Mason, M. Goulden and K. Frasch Academe 95, 11–17; 2009). “Our survey data show that young researchers believe the hours are long and the possibility of having work–life balance diminishes if one seeks tenure,” he says.

Hugo is convinced that, at least in Australia, the prospects for young academics are still good. But, he says, universities need to build more flexibility into recruitment schemes to deal with the constraints imposed by people working longer. Van Ummersen says that there are opportunities for universities to be creative — for example, establishing 'half-time' tenure-track lines that could be split between early-career researchers and faculty members entering phased retirement agreements — to help meet career and personal issues for both junior and senior faculty members.

"Universities have only begun to change the way they adjust to the needs of faculty members," says van Ummersen. “The university was invented for monks in monasteries. That model doesn't fit the twenty-first century."

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