

# 9 out of 10

top employers post jobs on Science Careers

Science Careers  
From the journal Science  
www.ScienceCareers.org

Science



Magazine

News

Signaling

Careers

Multimedia

Collections

Science Careers From the journal Science

Jobs

Funding

Meetings and Events

Career Development

For Advertisers

About Science Careers

Science Home > Science Careers > Career Development > Previous Issues > 2008 > 2008-05-02 > Wald

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

E-Mail This Article Print This Article Share This Related Articles



### Structuring Academic Careers in Europe

Chelsea Wald  
Sweden  
2 May 2008

When biochemist Philipp Scherer finished his postdoc at the [Whitehead Institute](#) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1997, he thought he was in a good place. He had worked in a laboratory with an excellent reputation, and he had published well. In fact, he got several offers for assistant professorships in the United States.

But when he assessed his options for returning to his native Switzerland, the situation looked bleak. The best program there for researchers at his career stage was a 5-year government grant that would have left him jobless when it was over. In contrast, those U.S. tenure-track jobs offered him the opportunity to earn a promotion and a permanent position on the university faculty in the same amount of time. The decision was a "no-brainer," he says. He went to the [Albert Einstein College of Medicine](#), where he studied obesity and diabetes. Today, [he is a professor](#) at the [University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center](#) in Dallas.

"If we had a unified career structure, that would revolutionize European science. It would just start to draw everybody in." --

Tony Hyman, a professor at the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics

Many people, including Scherer, point to what

they see as Europe's flawed academic career structure as a major reason for the migration of European researchers to the United States. Each country has its own academic job titles and--often unwritten--career paths, making an international job search thorny and opaque.

### BUSINESS OFFICE FEATURES

Not-So-Lost in Translation  
17 April 2008

A Boost for Vaccine Research  
28 March 2008

EXODUS TO ASIA: Research Opportunities Abound  
21 March 2008

More

### CAREER TOOLS AND RESOURCES

#### Current Employers

Learn more about the employers advertising positions on our site.

#### Science Careers Forum

Post a question, get an answer on our online community

#### Graduate Programs

Browse our database of program profiles

#### How-To Guides

Writing a resume/CV

Also, European universities often offer junior positions without any consideration of whether there will be another position when it ends, so researchers can be left jobless halfway through their careers even if they have done excellent work.

Now, with the strengthening of social and political unity in Europe, there is a new optimism that the situation can change, even in the notoriously intransigent world of academia. Several universities have embarked on projects to better define their own career structures, and work has begun on a Europe-wide standard. Critics of the current system argue that if Europeans get this right, Europe could become a more attractive research environment than the United States, which is suffering from a weak economy and deep cuts in federally funded research. "They really are in a position right now to be very competitive with respect to the U.S. job market," says Scherer.



Philipp Scherer

- [Beating the interview](#)
- [Getting funding](#)
- [Managing a lab and staff](#)
- [Building your network](#)

**Salary Tools**

[Find out how much you're worth with our salary calculator](#)

[To Advertise](#) [Find Products](#)

**A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**

Among the new wave of reformers is the [Karolinska Institute](#) (KI) in Stockholm, Sweden, which inaugurated a new career structure last year. Because very few European institutions have explicit, formalized career paths, KI had to model its structure on those of institutions in the United States, says Katarina Bjelke, KI's director for research and postgraduate education. What they came up with was a structure that consists of two tracks: one for researchers and one for teachers. KI encourages movement between the two tracks, and both can lead to open-ended professorships--the equivalent of tenure in the United States.



Katarina Bjelke

The new structure emphasizes transparency and evaluation. Candidates earn their jobs either in an open competition or by going through a review by an outside evaluator. One effect of this, Bjelke says, is that when department heads hire someone, they have to think almost immediately about that person's next career step, including whether there will be funding available to keep the person on board. "You have to consider, 'How many staff should we have?'" much further in advance than you had to earlier," she says. If the department heads fail to take the necessary steps to promote someone, the employee will have plenty of warning that it's time to start looking for a new job--warning that was often lacking before. The emphasis on open evaluation also counters perceptions that in European

academia, hiring and promotion favor internal, well-networked researchers over outside talent.

Although KI's leadership is proud of the new structure, "it's not in any way an ideal career system," Bjelke says. One thing holding them back is that Swedish higher education employment law constrains the jobs they can offer. Most significantly, Swedish law doesn't recognize the specific category of "postdoc." KI offers postdoc positions by fitting them under an allowed category, but it can only offer them for 2-year stints. That's because, in this category, contracts of more than 2 years have to be open-ended, which would effectively turn postdocs into low-paid tenured professors. Unfortunately, Bjelke says, a 2-year postdoc doesn't generally give people enough experience to qualify for the next step in the career track, so researchers must go elsewhere for another postdoc or research position.

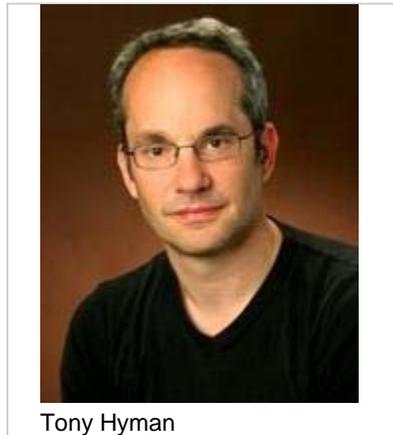
Bjelke and her colleagues are optimistic that Sweden will change its law to include a 4- or 5-year postdoctoral position soon. Then there could be a seamless track from postdoc to research assistant, which can last a maximum of 4 years, and then to senior researcher, which has a fixed term of 2 years. After that, the job track ends with the coveted open-ended

professorships. "It's not that very different" from the U.S. system, Bjelke says, although people aren't placed on an "up-or-out" tenure track. In fact, KI hopes to legally change the job titles to more closely match the U.S. titles, for example, from research assistant to assistant professor and from senior researcher to associate professor.

Although Bjelke doubts that all European universities will be willing to make such major changes, she hopes that universities throughout Europe will start to follow KI's lead: "What we can all do is write down our career path in order to be transparent."

## A GRAND PLAN

That would be a step in the right direction, says Tony Hyman, a professor at the [Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics](#) in Dresden, Germany. He is heading a working group on academic career structures for the [Initiative for Science in Europe](#), an organization that lobbies for the European scientific community. The working group met for the first time in December and will soon release its first document, an overview of and recommendations for academic career structures in Europe.



Tony Hyman

What the working group has found, Hyman says, is that there's "a complete patchwork of career structures" throughout Europe and even in some cases within countries. For example, although in most countries a Ph.D. is sufficient to join the faculty at universities, in Germany, the habilitation qualification--essentially writing and presenting a second thesis--is sometimes necessary. In another example, the position that KI calls research assistant is called junior professor, assistant professor, or lecturer in other countries and institutions.

This lack of a transparent and unified system, Hyman says, is so befuddling that it drives European researchers out of the European job market and prevents foreign researchers from entering it. "If we had a unified career structure, that would revolutionize European science," he says. "It would just start to draw everybody in."

A standardized system could most benefit people in the early-career positions--those that fall between postdocs and professorships, says Gottfried Schatz, professor emeritus at the [University of Basel](#) in Switzerland and former president of the [Swiss Science and Technology Council](#). In the European systems, those researchers are often subservient to a senior researcher, so they "don't have a chance to work independently and exploit their own ideas while they're still young," Schatz says. Scherer agrees that these positions are not equivalent to that of assistant professor in the United States, where researchers direct their own research groups.



Gottfried Schatz

Further, any new system should address the "gap in the career structure" between the junior and senior levels, Hyman says. In most sectors of the economy, Hyman says, "if you do a good job, you keep your job; if you don't, you get fired." But in European academia, junior researchers often effectively get fired, even if they do a good job, because another position is not available for them either because of poor advanced planning and funding or because of a fixed junior-to-senior ratio within an institution. It's no wonder, Hyman says, that in the face of this uncertainty, young people choose to go abroad or enter industry instead of staying at European universities. "People need to be able to plan their careers with an acceptable level of risk," Schatz says. "Tenure

track fulfills that goal."

But it will be an uphill battle to bring a unified tenure system to Europe, Schatz says. "Most universities don't understand what tenure track is," and his experience suggests that their leaders don't necessarily see the need for change. And although Hyman wants to work around legal barriers instead of trying to change them, Kl's experience suggests that that approach won't always be possible. "I think we're not ready for one system," Bjelke says.

Others, like Hyman, are optimistic. He says a simple first step toward a transparent Europe-wide job market would be to standardize job titles and post jobs on a predictable schedule and in a common place, such as a central Web site. "No money's required," he says, just an agreement that he says is an obvious extension of the Bologna process, a mandate to standardize higher education in Europe to allow for student mobility. "Europe has done quite well in standards," he says, "so I think these things can work extremely quickly."

Chelsea Wald is a freelance science writer currently traveling throughout Europe.	Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback <a href="#">to our editor</a> .
Photos. Top: <a href="#">D'Arcy Norman</a> . Others: courtesy of the subjects.	DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800063

**RELATED CONTENT**

**[Independence for Young German Scientists](#)**  
9 December 2005,

**[Tenure Review: The Long and the Short of It](#)**  
18 October 2002,

 [E-Mail This Article](#)  [Print This Article](#)  [Share This](#)  [Related Articles](#)

[Magazine](#) | [News](#) | [Signaling](#) | [Careers](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Collections](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#) | [RSS](#)  
[Subscribe](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Privacy / Legal](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Contact Us](#)

© 2008 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All Rights Reserved.  
AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, PatientInform, CrossRef, and COUNTER.