



QUALIFICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHING

An overview

A cursory search for what qualifies faculty to teach university at undergraduate and graduate level across countries suffices to establish that this must be one of the least regulated professions in the world in terms of required skills.

This – scant – overview aims to provide a comparative glimpse at academic career paths and requirements in selected countries that span several regions across the globe. Countries reviewed below are: the United States, four European Union member states (Germany, Denmark, Italy and Spain), the United Kingdom, and India.

- **In the United States**, having a doctoral degree in a relevant field is a virtual requirement, at least if prospective faculty aim to get tenure. Holders of a master's degree may be able to obtain a teaching position at some community colleges and technical schools, but even there the competition is fierce and candidates with a Ph.D. will usually be given preference.

The additional credential most often cited is teaching experience, which usually occurs as part of the graduate program when students are encouraged – and, if on a scholarship, required – to work as teaching assistants under the supervision of a full-time faculty member. More certification may also be required in certain fields, in particular those where students will have to get a license in order to become professionals. In this case, a teacher will be required to hold the same license – e.g., a nursing license to teach in nursing school, a teaching license for teachers college, etc. Specific work experience in a relevant occupation may also be a significant plus in scientific fields – e.g. postdoctoral research and work experience in biology, physics, chemistry.

Tenure-track positions, once a fixture of the American higher-education landscape, have become increasingly sparse in recent years. University teaching carried out by adjunct professors, i.e. instructors hired on part-time, non-tenure-track, fixed-term contracts, now accounts for over 60 percent of the total, and there are clear indications that this trend will only

expand in coming years. When a tenure-track position does open, the recipient will join faculty as assistant professor, then possibly move to associate professor status, thus tenure, within seven to eight years – though it must be noted that most assistant-professor positions today are non-tenure. Promotion and tenure are subjected to academic and scientific achievement, measured primarily as volume and standing of publications, and secondarily – but nevertheless significantly – as quality of teaching performance grounded in student feedback. Service in academic and administrative matters is also a consideration. Assessment criteria of these entirely depend on individual universities and colleges. Ultimate promotion to full professorship may or may not occur after serving a minimum of five years as associate professor, based on availability of positions and fulfillment of criteria. Mobility between institutions is high, and getting promoted often means changing institutions.

Unlike what happens with virtually all fields of work that require a university degree, *teaching* competencies in demand for teaching university remain a loose category that each institution can thus define as it sees fit, with virtually no framework or guidelines, whether directed at public or private universities and colleges, provided at federal level. Thus, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in the Postsecondary Teachers section of its Occupational Outlook Handbook lists only as “important qualities” required for postsecondary teaching the following competencies: *critical-thinking skills, interpersonal skills, speaking and writing skills, and resourcefulness*.

Sources:

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/postsecondary-teachers.htm>

<https://www.learnhowtobecome.org/professor/>

<https://work.chron.com/minimum-qualifications-become-professor-1416.html>

<https://www.teacher.org/career/college-professor/>

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-become-a-college-professor-requirements>

- Though there is no coordinated structure for academic career paths at **European-Union** level, the professional literature alludes to a “Continental European model” reflecting the perception that teaching positions in higher education are more often obtained through personal contacts than based on merit. Qualification and promotion paths do vary widely across member states, despite the goal of the Bologna process to bring more coherence to higher education systems throughout Europe. For an intra-European comparative perspective, this section focuses on **Germany, Denmark, Italy and Spain**.

In **Germany**, candidates to academic teaching positions must have a doctoral degree and can apply for two main entry positions: scientific assistant, which requires a candidate to prepare the habilitation (or “second Ph.D.”, usually a second dissertation or several scientific publications of outstanding quality), and junior professor (a status introduced by a 2001 reform as an alternative to the habilitation). Both paths can open the promotion to further statuses

(e.g. W2, W3), which, unlike in the United States or United Kingdom, are not consequential, and may be obtained at other institutions. The leading path to professorship, however, remains the habilitation despite the 2001 reform. The appointment procedure puts particular emphasis on “subject-specific competence”.

In **Denmark**, a teaching position can be obtained before completion of the doctoral program. A Ph.D. candidate, or what is called an adjunkt/postdoc, actually occupies a – limited – teaching position. Completion of the doctoral program, teaching experience and evidence of publications will then move an applicant in the same institution to the lecturer level, and subsequently to assistant professorship and full professorship – both either fixed-term or permanent positions since a 2007 reform. Positions of associate professor and senior researcher are submitted to further qualifications such as pedagogical competencies and teaching qualification – with, for example, the University of Copenhagen offering a full range of courses on university teaching in its Department of Science Education.

– Since the 2001 and 2005 reforms, the entry position in an academic career path in **Italy** is that of “ricercatore” – researcher, accessible via a competitive examination, lasting three years with or without a possibility of extension, and involving teaching duties. This position usually requires a doctoral degree. Only ricercatore contracts with a possibility of extension can subsequently lead to the position of associate professor. To apply for associate professorship, a ricercatore must first get competency recognition (“idoneita”) by a national committee within a given discipline through a national competition, and subsequently has four years to get a position. To then move to a full professorship position, an associate professor must once again pass a national competition to get competency recognition (“abilitazione”) based on the extent and nature of publications, and then a local competition before going through the hiring process in a specific university.

- The usual entry position for academics in **Spain** is that of assistant professor (“profesor ayudante doctor”), which requires a doctoral degree and an accreditation from ANECA, the national evaluation agency. The next step is to move on to the status of professor on a contract (“profesor contratado doctor”), which requires at least three years of postdoctoral experience and a researcher accreditation certificate. Candidates’ merit is assessed on the basis of quality evaluation in teaching, research, coordination and supervision of academic activities and administration, though the leading dimension is usually research. Professorship then occurs at two possible levels: associate professor and full professor. Both are obtained on the basis of the candidate’s scientific achievements and publication record.

Source:

<https://www.eui.eu/ProgrammesAndFellowships/AcademicCareersObservatory/AcademicCareersbyCountry>

https://www.ind.ku.dk/english/course_overview/teacher_training/

- In the **United Kingdom**, where competition between institutions is higher than in most other European countries, the entry level position is that of lecturer. While entry-level lectureship positions can be accessible to doctoral students, more senior lectureship opportunities require a doctoral degree, and postdoctoral training is a plus. In the absence of formally-established competencies, the professional literature emphasizes that skills needed in a lecturer include *verbal and written communication, creativity, patience and control, as well as commitment.*

Permanent professorship positions are increasingly rare in the UK, and mobility between institutions is therefore high. However, a lectureship position can itself become permanent, and be accessed by junior academics soon after they have completed their Ph.D. – a feature that is unique to the UK system. A permanent lecturer can nevertheless be promoted either via nomination by heads of department or by applying for promotion under the internal career advancement system specific to each institution – a process that relies on an in-house academic committee. A more frequent path to promotion is application for higher positions in other institutions.

Promotions are based on experience in teaching and research. The Research Excellence Framework, Britain's system for assessing the quality of research in UK institutions of higher education, has in recent years emphasized the significance of research productivity in assessing faculty performance and therefore promotion prospects.

Sources:

<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/higher-education-lecturer>

<https://www.fish4.co.uk/career-advice/how-to-become-a-lecturer/>

<https://www.eui.eu/ProgrammesAndFellowships/AcademicCareersObservatory/AcademicCareersbyCountry>

- **In India**, the academic career path seems more structured than in most Western countries examined. Candidates with only a master's degree can apply for entry-level positions such as lecturer or demonstrator, but those aspiring to posts of assistant professor and junior research fellows must in addition either have passed the National Eligibility Test (also called UGC NET since the test is administered by the University Grants Commission of India, a government agency that determines and manages standards of higher education) – a highly competitive exam with single-digit success ratios – or hold a doctoral degree.

The next promotional step in an academic career is the position of associate professor, accessed after six to eight years of teaching and research experience and at least five publications in recognized journals. Finally, becoming a full professor requires a doctoral degree, 12 to 14 years of teaching and research experience, and at least ten publications in recognized outlets. In addition, a candidate to full professorship must have the minimum

Academic Performance Indicator (API) required by the UGC according to criteria set by the UGC (including number of hours taught, domain knowledge, evaluation and student feedback).

While having passed the NET entitles holders to teach at any university in India, a different exam, the State Eligibility Test, is also available but only allows those who pass it to teach at state universities and colleges.

Sources:

<https://www.jagranjosh.com/articles/how-to-become-professor-in-university-or-degree-college-1501041246-1>

<https://swarajyamag.com/culture/how-academia-works-in-india>

Conclusion

As hinted above, teaching and researching in academia may well be the only high-skill job requiring a graduate education that does not train for and cultivate competencies specific to the main professional activities practitioners will exercise once they start working.

With few legal frameworks establishing relevant qualifications at national, federal or regional levels, institutions of higher learning are predominantly free to establish their own requirements for the recruitment of faculty, and at entry level those tend to be, by and large, a doctoral degree in a field relevant to subjects taught, with no additional training in pedagogy and research methodologies. Thus, while practicing medicine obviously requires having a medical degree and law a law degree, and while teaching at primary- and secondary-education level requires full graduate training and certification in relevant pedagogies, the underlying assumption behind recruitment processes in higher education seems to be that prospective university instructors and researchers will acquire the necessary skills simply by being exposed as students to the teaching and researching skills of their own professors. There is no other occupational field requiring a university degree or other form of tertiary education in which this oddity can be observed.

As commoditization and the growing use of EdTech, including big data and AI, and of online teaching keep transforming the global landscape of higher education, it can be assumed that competency requirements for faculty will evolve significantly in the coming years. Yet it is highly likely that the absence of a requirement for formal training as teacher and researcher *per se* will remain a distinctive feature of the instructor-researcher profession in universities.