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Academic Inbreeding: Local Challenge, Global Problem

Philip G. Altbach, Maria Yudkevich, and Laura E. Rumbley

Why examine “academic inbreeding,” a seemingly small and peripheral aspect of the academic profession, involving the appointment of faculty members who graduated from the institution employing them? *Academic Inbreeding and Mobility in Higher Education: Global Perspectives* had its origins in a concern at the National Research University – Higher School of Economics in Moscow that the common practice in Russia of hiring one’s own graduates for faculty jobs has profound implications for academic culture, productivity, and the essential nature of the university. This interest led to a research project collaboratively organized by the Higher School of Economics and the Boston College Center for International Higher Education and centered on an examination of academic inbreeding in eight different countries: Argentina, China, Japan, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, South Africa, and Ukraine. We quickly discovered that faculty inbreeding is common worldwide – and not just a concern in Russia. Indeed, hiring one’s own graduates is not considered either unusual or problematic in many countries. The pattern has been in place for many years – often for centuries – and is quite often considered a point of pride for a higher education system, as clear evidence that the system is able to retain its best intellectual talent.

Our perspective is that faculty inbreeding is problematic. It limits the scope of hiring the best possible candidates for academic appointments – both from within the country and internationally. Inbreeding tends to entrench the existing academic culture in the institution and make change and reform even more difficult than would normally be the case. It solidifies hierarchical relationships within departments and faculties and enhances the power of senior professors. Inbreeding may perpetuate unfair power dynamics reflected in society more broadly. New ideas, concerning the academic discipline as well as the organization of studies

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and the curriculum, are more difficult to implement. This occurs because both faculty and administrators consider the status quo to be “natural” and beneficial, and their interests are squarely invested in established academic and administrative arrangements. In short, new perspectives and new relationships do not take hold as easily where inbreeding is prevalent, and departments, schools, and the entire university are less innovative and open. In the 21st century, where knowledge is rapidly changing and increasingly globalized, inbreeding engenders traditionalism, which limits excellence and innovation.

Inbred faculty tend to be more “local” in their orientation. They exhibit more loyalty and commitment to their university rather than reflecting a “cosmopolitan” orientation, which is typified by a greater focus on their discipline and a broader identification with the academic profession at large (Gouldner 1957). In general, faculty with a local orientation are less focused on research and less involved with the wider academic community. They invest more in the types of activities that are visible and rewarded within the individual university – that is, teaching and administrative duties, which are less appreciated by the academic market. Indeed, while publications in peer-reviewed journals or a record of obtaining grants can easily be recognized on a CV and increase a professor’s “value” on the academic market, teaching efforts and administrative duties are quite often “sunk costs” for those seeking to move from one institution to another.

Yet, our research revealed not only that a surprising number of institutions and countries have a long tradition of academic inbreeding but also that there are understandable – and in some cases quite pragmatic – reasons for adherence to such practices and policies. Many countries lack a labor market for academic jobs, and there is no tradition of mobility. In extreme cases, those academics who seek jobs at other universities could even be considered potentially problematic individuals, that is, those who have been pushed out by their home institutions. With these kinds of prejudices, it becomes difficult for academics to find a good position at another institution without informal connections. Indeed, in systems with significant levels of inbreeding, informal ties start to play an important role in recruitment and promotion decisions. The interests of senior faculty in hiring their own former students or assistants can be a critical factor influencing recruitment decisions. Ad hoc decision-making and approaches to hiring based on informal ties in many countries coexist with – and overshadow – formal systems of “open” recruitment and promotion. While formal procedures (like open calls for hiring and public competitions for promotion, etc.) are in place,

nobody believes they really work; such procedures are considered an artificial facade masking the real processes, which are based on personal relationships and “insider” knowledge.

Thus, it is quite difficult, in very practical terms, for a graduate of one university to obtain an academic job at a different institution – and few ways of moving from one institution to another once appointed. In small countries, few universities produce doctoral graduates, and thus small national systems may often be staffed by graduates of a single research university. As our research shows, graduate schools, as a central place for the training of future academics, play a critical role in reproducing inbreeding practices. In those systems where PhD candidates are also employed as teaching assistants in their respective departments, inbreeding is often inevitable. Up until the moment of their doctoral defense, these individuals are deeply integrated into the department in terms of sharing values and informal ties with their colleagues. In this way, they naturally gain obvious preference over external candidates seeking employment in the department.

Historical and cultural tradition is perhaps the greatest reason for academic inbreeding – universities often feel that since their own graduates are well trained and since they understand the culture and traditions of the institution, they will therefore “fit in” to the existing academic community. By taking in their own graduates, universities minimize efforts exerted in search and recruitment processes and also minimize the risks of poor hiring decisions. They are able to select the most loyal candidates who share the basic values of the organization and research community and will work toward further preservation of these values. Continuity and respect for the institution’s “academic heritage” is considered an important virtue in these contexts. In turn, the ability of a department to keep its best faculty for years is considered a sign of academic quality.

In most countries where academic inbreeding exists, it is generally not considered a problem. The practice is so commonplace and longstanding in many systems that it is frequently not “considered” at all! The inbreeding arrangement is widely accepted, and universities are perceived to work well and produce appropriate quality in teaching and research. Indeed, research in a number of countries shows that inbred faculty are not notably less productive in terms of research output than professors who are not inbred. Importantly, however, this research does not take into account the quality or innovativeness of the research that is produced by inbred faculty. Indeed, inbred faculty may be more oriented toward local journals and publications than noninbred

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academics who care about global recognition for what they are doing. That is, even if inbred faculty are sometimes formally more productive than their noninbred colleagues, such comparisons should be undertaken with great caution and the results interpreted properly. As existing literature shows, countries with a higher level of inbreeding produce a smaller share of the world's research output (measured by publications in leading peer-reviewed journals; see, for example, Soler 2001).

Despite established traditions of inbreeding in a number of countries, there is a general perception in the academic community globally, when this topic is considered at all, that inbreeding is generally a negative characteristic and that world-class universities should not be inbred. Some leading universities even have put “anti-inbreeding” policies into place. For example, many of the top universities in China, including Peking University, no longer hire their own graduates for academic jobs – indeed, many Chinese universities favor hiring Chinese graduates of the best Western universities. Some institutions are increasingly hiring from an international talent pool. Other countries allow universities to hire their own graduates but only after they gain some considerable international academic experience. Policy-makers in these countries are well aware of potential negative consequences of inbreeding and believe that they are often correlated with little academic mobility. So, by assuring such an academic mobility, they try to cope with potential negative impact of limited outside experience and absence of external connections.

When we started work on *Academic Inbreeding and Mobility in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*, we assumed that academic inbreeding would be on the decline worldwide and that there would be a consensus that the practice should be promptly ended. The research reported in this book does not support this assumption. In most of the countries discussed here, inbreeding is not seen as a serious problem, even if there is a general recognition that reforms may be useful. Some data show that academic productivity of inbred faculty is not significantly different than for other faculty. However, we remain convinced that the best universities of the 21st century will be outward looking, internationally minded, and open to the best academic minds from their countries and the world. These characteristics do not favor hiring “from within.”

Comparative perspectives on inbreeding

To capture a comparative picture of inbreeding practices and policies across the eight countries included in this study, we asked each of

our country experts to complete a common questionnaire. Our experts gave their opinions (in some cases, based on in-depth interviews with policy-makers and university administrators) about the importance and prevalence of various phenomena related to inbreeding. The experts were also asked to consider how inbreeding plays out in different segments of the higher education systems in their country (e.g., in elite universities vs. “on average” in the system). This effort resulted in the collection of qualitative data that allow us (to some extent) to compare countries’ experiences with inbreeding and to see some common patterns. As will be discussed further, despite considerable differences among our study countries in terms of size and many other important characteristics, they share some commonalities in relation to the rationale, realities, and consequences of inbreeding.

Inbreeding and immobility

As has already been mentioned, inbreeding and academic immobility (a single-university career) are often associated (see Figure 1.1). Indeed, inbreeding is commonly caused by the absence of a domestic academic market (especially for senior positions), housing anomalies that affect

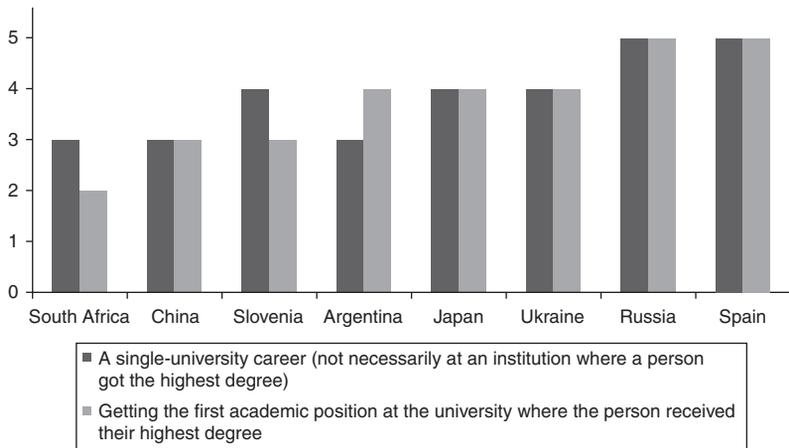


Figure 1.1 National higher education experts’ opinions on the degree of academic immobility in their respective country

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from “1 – phenomenon doesn’t exist in the system” to “5 – phenomenon is very widespread within the system.”

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

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the possibilities for mobility (such as limited options for apartment rental), as well as cultural values that view organizations like families and reward loyalty and longevity. All these factors contribute in different ways to limited employment mobility and single-university careers.

In terms of consequences, inbreeding and single-university careers are also quite alike since both severely limit outside experience of faculty. They both force faculty to invest in competences, activities, and outputs that are more visible and rewarded within the employing university than outside it. This explains, for example, why inbred and nonmobile faculty usually teach more and spend more time on administrative and service duties. Limited external experience also induces faculty to accept existing academic routines and practices noncritically, as given, and often be neither interested nor able to contribute toward changing existing standards or models of academic governance.

Inbreeding and prestige

In our comparative study, we included only countries with high levels of inbreeding, in general terms (Figure 1.2). However, inbreeding levels

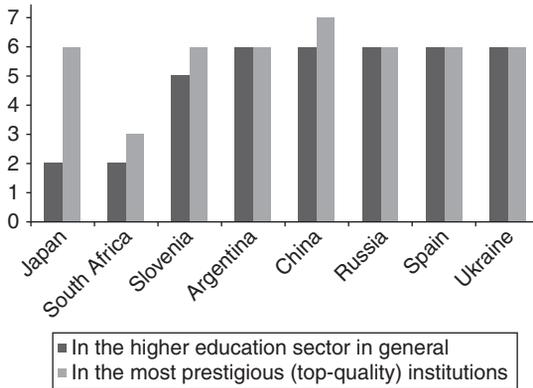


Figure 1.2 National higher education experts' opinions on the level of inbreeding in the higher education system in their respective country, on average versus within the most prestigious (top-quality) universities

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from "1 – phenomenon doesn't exist in the system" to "7 – phenomenon is very widespread within the system."

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

can be different for different segments within a given national higher education system. Indeed, for the countries included in this study (and this is consistent with previous literature on inbreeding), inbreeding is more common among high-quality, elite institutions than in the system on average. There are several reasons for this. First, the best universities believe (in most cases, quite reasonably) that their graduates are the most well prepared and find it difficult to recruit outsiders with comparable skills and potential. Second, faculty in top universities actively cooperate with international colleagues and are well integrated into the international academic community. This makes the consequences of inbreeding less harmful in this environment.

In contrast, low-quality institutions in many countries demonstrate lower levels of inbreeding than average (Figure 1.3). However, this is not due to their understanding of the harmful nature of this phenomenon, but is explained by the fact that low-quality institutions often do not have their own core faculty and must attract faculty from other institutions on part-time or pay-per-hour contracts. Such institutions also do not often have their own PhD programs, which are usually the main source of young faculty when hired from within.

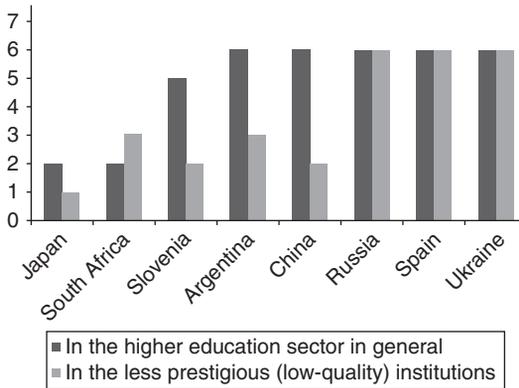


Figure 1.3 National higher education experts' opinions on the level of inbreeding in the higher education system in their respective country, on average versus within low-quality universities

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from "1 – phenomenon doesn't exist in the system" to "7 – phenomenon is very widespread within the system."

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

The causes of inbreeding

As for the reasons why academic inbreeding occurs, there is no general consensus on the most important factors across the study countries. Thus, uncompetitive earnings for academics are mentioned as an important factor for Russia, Argentina, and Spain (see Figure 1.4), while in other countries, faculty income seems less important.

Experts from most of the study countries, however, stress the general importance of social ties in this discussion (see Figure 1.5). China and South Africa are the only countries where social ties do not represent an important factor supporting inbreeding.

Experts in these countries (and also in Japan and Slovenia) believe that preference for internal candidates is shown only when the internal candidate is genuinely perceived to be stronger than the external applicants (see Figure 1.6). In other words, in many countries experts believe that there is no prejudice toward external candidates and that inbreeding is in some sense the consequence of deep university beliefs that their own graduates are the most attractive for hiring purposes.

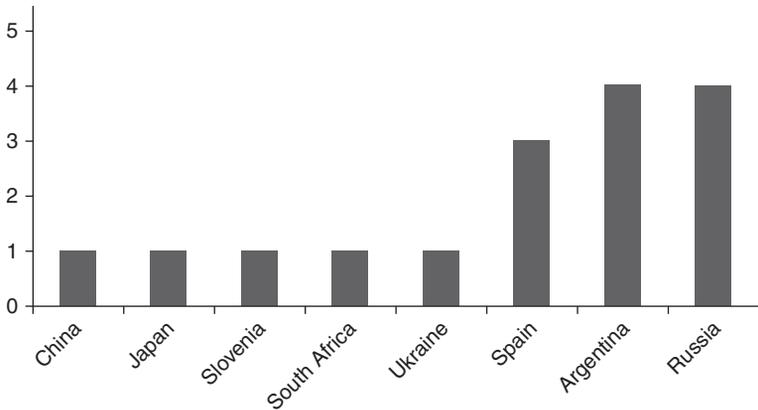


Figure 1.4 National higher education experts' opinions on the reasons for academic inbreeding: uncompetitive earnings in academia

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from “1 – strongly disagree with the statement ‘On average, the main reason for academic inbreeding is that earnings in academia are uncompetitive compared to the non academic labor market (therefore, it is difficult to attract outside candidates and only those with a prior attachment to a specific university can be effectively recruited)’ ” to “5 – strongly agree with this statement.”

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

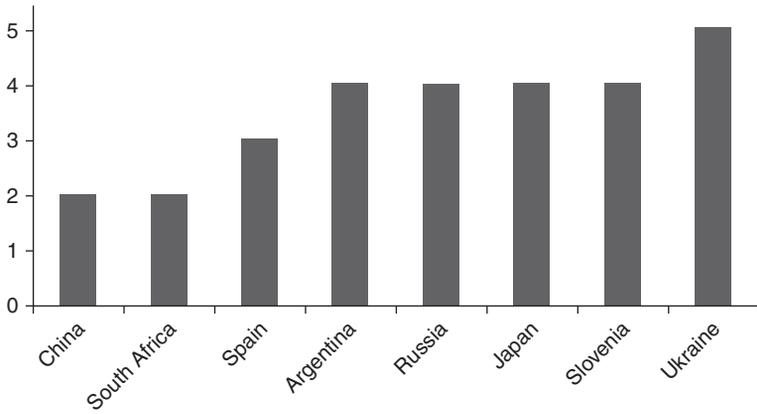


Figure 1.5 National higher education experts' opinions on the reasons for academic inbreeding: importance of social ties

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from "1 – strongly disagree with the statement 'On average, the main reason for academic inbreeding is that social ties in general have traditionally exerted a strong influence within the academic system'" to "5 – strongly agree with this statement."

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

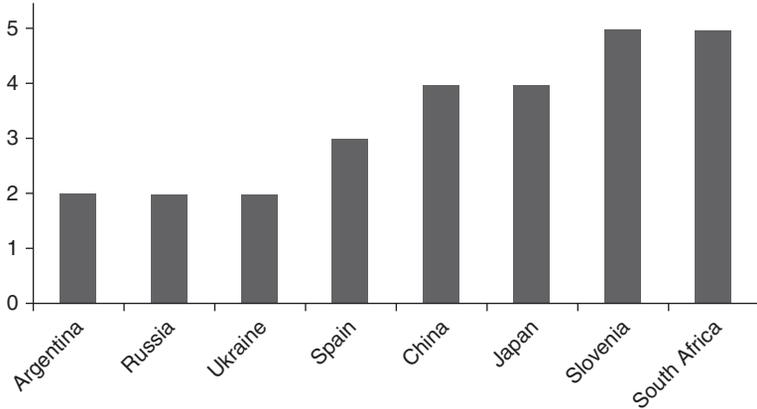


Figure 1.6 National higher education experts' opinions on the reasons for academic inbreeding: preference is shown to inbred candidates only when they are more competent than other candidates

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from "1 – strongly disagree with the statement 'Preference is shown to inbred candidates only when they are more competent than other candidates'" to "5 – strongly agree with this statement."

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

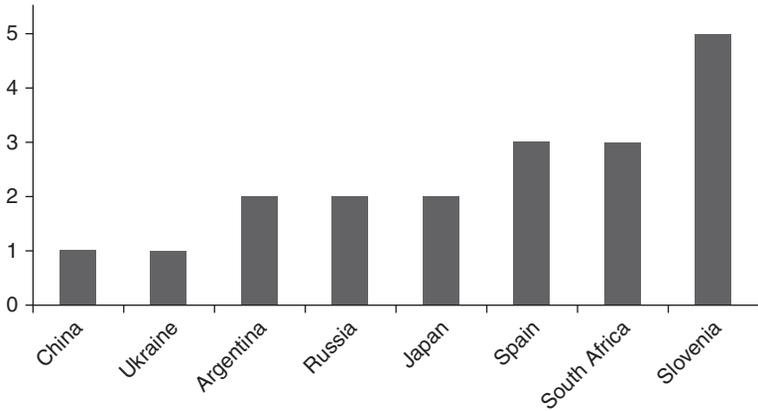
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Figure 1.7 National higher education experts' opinions on the reasons for academic inbreeding: inbred candidates are hired only if a university is forced to use this hiring policy

Note: Data reflect responses to the project survey with Likert Scale responses ranging from “1 – strongly *disagree* with the statement ‘Inbred candidates are hired only if a university is forced to use this hiring policy (e.g., where there is a lack of financial resources to compete for external academics; unfavorable geographic location of a university)’ ” to “5 – strongly *agree* with this statement.”

Source: The survey of national higher education experts conducted specifically for this project.

We think that these beliefs are critically important for reproducing and sustaining inbreeding over decades and even centuries.

In some countries (including Argentina, Russia, and Ukraine), however, a strong bias in favor of insiders exists and is confirmed by experts. In most of our study countries, experts believe that inbreeding is not caused by external factors and is explained by what is going on within the university itself. Most experts disagree with the notion that inbred candidates are hired only if a university is forced to use this hiring policy (Figure 1.7). The only exception is Slovenia.

Hiring practices and candidates' prospects

In many countries, hiring procedures are organized around “open calls” for positions, with clearly defined job descriptions and candidate prerequisites. Positions also specify the obligations candidates should meet once hired. However, in many countries with high inbreeding, these “open and competitive” procedures are essentially pretense, as no one believes in the possibility of genuinely fair chances for outsiders to

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