

## **AN ETHICAL ISSUE-ACADEMIC INCEST: MAINTAINING STATUS QUO IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Rasim Basak, Ph.D.  
School of Education  
Uludag University-Bursa, Turkey  
[rasimbasak@uludag.edu.tr](mailto:rasimbasak@uludag.edu.tr)

### **ABSTRACT**

Academic Incest is a term to describe inbreeding in higher education institutions to maintain status quo. Respected universities in the United States do not favor hiring professors, who received the degrees from their own universities; instead, they prefer diversity and hire professors with degrees from various other universities. When someone receives the degree from a university and starts working at the same university immediately upon graduation, it is called academic incest suggesting a negative connotation to the biological term “incest”. At some instances, typically receiving all undergraduate and graduate degrees from the same institution is also considered “academic incest”, because diversity in educational background is suggested to be beneficial and makes someone’s education more valuable. In this paper, I will discuss academic traditions in Turkey and in the United States as opposing examples of Academic Incest. Why traditionally many Turkish Universities prefer Academic Incest in hiring as a way of maintaining status quo, and whether it is an ethical issue at higher education; will also be discussed.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, An Ethical Issue, Academic Incest

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Inbreeding” connotes a similar meaning to “incest” with one difference that, it is conducted to preserve desirable characteristics. Because of this “incest” seems more appropriate to describe “academic inbreeding”. The ‘Academic Incest’ does not have a specific dictionary definition but it is widely used in the Western academic tradition to describe either for someone having received all undergraduate and graduate degrees from the same university; or hiring someone who received the degrees from the same university.

### **Academic Incest**

It should be questioned why such a strong term with negative connotation has been used to describe something about education in academia? Usually it is believed that diversity in academic background is valuable and important for an extensive experience at various institutions. In addition, morality behind hiring someone who graduated from the same school is a concern. So, why some highly reputable schools carefully avoid academic incest? Is it such a negative if someone is well educated and has all the expected qualifications? It might have reasons since it is very common in some countries such as Turkey, others might argue its drawbacks.

In a study, Carlan, Lewis, and Dial (2009) noted Monk (2003) had suggested that academic incest does have some advantages: (1) increases the department’s continuity and cohesiveness, (2) makes a public statement about the department’s confidence in their program, and (3) is an inexpensive and quick means to obtain a faculty member with a particular specialty.

In some cases, there might be reluctance toward new faculty when hired from another institution, because it takes some time to get to know new faculty member and build their professional and personal relationships. They also do not know their potential and qualifications, yet; although they met specified selection criteria. Likewise, it is an advantage to be able to decide and choose someone who will work with you. This will prevent many unanticipated consequences in interpersonal level however, will serve to the faculty’s own interests even though it seems a bit egocentric. It may also result in feeling like a judge about graduate students’ future. This will also build a tension on graduate students’ shoulders since their academic future will be in the hands of their advisor or the other faculty members. Having such a position will also endanger separation of private and professional student/teacher relationships for unexpected consequences. Finding a job is becoming increasingly

difficult nowadays, especially in Turkey. It would be challenging when we know the institution we are studying at could hire us. It may also be difficult to prevent academic misconduct when graduate students have their employment future in their professors' hands.

Academic institutions build their old traditions with well-preserved continuing historical traditions. In the process, traditional norms become more important than individual approaches at such academic institutions. Usually, preservation of such long historical and academic traditions depends on well-established norms, which are adopted and preserved by individuals who come from the same tradition and school system. An institutionalized collegiality is so strong that it is above individualized approaches, and new hired academicians have to adopt and follow this academic identity and tradition. Perhaps, adapting an old and established set of traditions would be easier for academicians who are educated at and come from the same tradition. This is comparatively a conservative approach to academic tradition. It may be easier to preserve the old tradition but it will not be very open to change and new approaches in this case.

Diversity may have many benefits; however, it also may counter act in preserving academic traditions. Academic traditions are created in very long time. Today, old universities proudly show how old they are on their coat of arms. A comparatively quick circulation of faculty at universities may not be beneficial in maintaining academic traditions. Also, an ever-changing faculty background bred by other universities may function against building a strong collegiate identity and academic tradition.

### **Advantages of hiring faculty candidates from various institutions**

#### **Selecting the best candidates from a larger pool of candidates from various other institutions**

It is clear that hiring from various resources will be a benefit since it will give chance to choose from a variety of candidates from a diverse and larger pool. Usually hiring from own graduates means a limited number of candidates with known and expected backgrounds. Not only accepting applications from other backgrounds but also setting rules against academic incest will encourage candidates from various institutions. In a study, Carlan, et al. (2009) noted that Patterson (2004) contends that if one were to view higher education as an ecosystem, comprising species diverse in culture, values, and mission, both harmony and diversity could coexist. Page (2007) also concurs with Patterson that diversity in the workplace equals productivity, and argues that bringing together (as a team) individuals from different backgrounds offers diverse ways of both identifying problems and providing solutions to the problem. Carlan, et al. (2009) also noted that Ashby (1956) –based on Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety- would agree with Page (2007) that departments comprising faculty with credentials from multiple institutions and multiple related disciplines would be better prepared to adapt their program to an ever-changing environment than would a homosocial group.

#### **Supporting diversity to structure a richer academic tradition and environment.**

Diversity has become an important factor for institutions' democratization and globalization, and for increasingly multicultural structure of academia especially in the United States and many other Western countries. To preserve equal employment opportunities, many universities in the United States encourage applications of minorities with degrees from other universities. Diversity is a natural result of multicultural approaches in democratic societies and seen beneficial. Resourcing faculty demography from diverse backgrounds may have many benefits such as bringing a multicultural understanding in academia, promoting unity, tolerance and peace among people, enrichment of academic traditions under the same roof, and promoting democracy. These fundamental benefits of diversity are all indicators of an idealized higher education; "university" and so "academia". They all serve to change, development and improvement.

In a study, Carlan, et al. (2009) suggested that variation in faculty (i.e., race, gender, credential, discipline, etc.) permits an academic unit to have multiple perspectives about how a particular issue could be resolved, and a better chance that someone had already confronted such an issue while at another institution. Arguably, selecting a unit's best course of action from among several plausible solutions offers a better chance for informed discussion/dissent among the faculty than adopting a single course of action developed by a homosocial group (p. 250).

### **Supporting and encouraging best candidates as giving chance to candidates from other institutions**

For research-focused universities selecting faculty members from a variety of universities will provide them with finding best researchers with prioritized research focuses based on universities' and departments' interests. For teaching-focused smaller universities, resourcing faculty members from diverse backgrounds will contribute to enrich academic practices and the body of knowledge as well. Supporting diversity in hiring process will contribute to the universities to better function in research and also in teaching.

### **Maintaining justice in the hiring process as eliminating prejudices and bias**

Objectivity is one fundamental factor in hiring process. Judging candidates based on their résumés, their portfolios and recommendation letters, is not always an easy process and it also gives a big responsibility to the members of selection committee. When we are concerned about objectivity, it is clear that avoiding academic incest itself will help at great extent. How can we be objective when we are evaluating application of our own graduates, and how can we compare them with other candidates fairly?

### **Dissemination of knowledge nationally and internationally**

In today's world, international periodicals, publications, and professional networks, they all serve to disseminate knowledge and information in academia internationally. Isolated universities do not contribute to the global knowledge as expected. When we look at international statistics and demographics of universities, we can see that some universities contribute to the dissemination of knowledge at greater levels. It is clear that we are in need of a global sense and understanding, as well as global academic tradition to create better functioning universities, which creates, produces, and disseminates knowledge to and within larger populations.

### **Allowing a professional network of professionals nationally and globally**

As mentioned in the previous section, dissemination of knowledge created at universities is a vital function and purpose of academy. While English as 'lingua franca' contributes to this function, sharing and circulation of scholars among universities also help at great extent. Sharing scholars among universities does not only mean creating diversity, but it also means sharing academic traditions and also knowledge in academia. Academic incest may counter act with this function of universities, and this alone is a great reason to prevent academic incest.

### **Preventing status quo in higher education**

Status quo means the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues. As we all know, faculty members, staff and students consist of a social environment and affairs at an institution. Social and political dynamics at a school may be what someone calls a chain of status quo. From critical perspective, everything in human society is consists of power relations and that is not different in higher education. Power structure and status quo, however, may be a big obstacle for change and development. Academic incest may clearly serve to maintain power relations and status quo, which should be prevented.

## **Liberating science and scholars**

For an academician working in a hierarchical structure of status quo would be a nightmare at worst or unproductive at least. As known, scholasticism had hegemony over academe during Middle Ages based on church tradition and dogma. Heavy influence of Christian Church controlled philosophy and science during Middle Ages. Scholasticism today is described as narrow-minded insistence on a traditional doctrine. In today's free and independent academe, scholasticism as in "academic incest" has to be avoided at all costs. In fact, academic inbreeding is one of those hierarchical structures rooted as old as scholasticism of Middle Ages.

## **Ethics of Academic Inbreeding**

When we look at the status quo within social and political power structures, it is expected that guarding existing state of affairs and power structures may be beneficial for certain people or groups. In a study, Zhuravlev, et al. (2009) examined status quo in Post-Soviet Union universities in Russia. In the study it is seen that Soviet Union universities had a strong tradition of academic incest, a system which not only reproduced academic skills but also reproduced controlled transmission of key academic positions, and the system itself focused more on the stability of academic order. In the Soviet Union system of academia it is indicated that hiring someone's own students and then giving them key academic and administrative positions were typical and seen as normal. Basically, "the best students at the school, become professors in their own departments, reproducing the system that originally produced them." (Zhuravlev, et al., 2009). Then at a department of The European University at St. Petersburg they adopted the Western system with a decision that they would not hire their own students- or at least, not before a long period of time has passed... They explained: "We don't need clones of ourselves. Until those whom we taught become independent scholars, we don't need them." (Zhuravlev, et al., 2009).

Perhaps there are reasons to take action against academic inbreeding however, as Carlan, et al. (2009) indicated that in specific situations such as in fields where there are limited applicants to select faculty members from, departments searching for variety may overlook or discount better qualified candidates graduating from their own program. They also quoted Monk (2003: p. B13) had noted that "institutional inbreeding or academic incest" is usually frowned upon except in universities that already have an outstanding reputation. These universities may have their reasons to hire their own graduates, but it seems problematic when it becomes a tradition itself.

Zhuravlev, et al. (2009) pointed the West and the Russian academic establishments, as two poles rather than as academic traditions. From Western point of view creating an academic tradition has to depend on creating a liberal structure within academia since science has to be independent from the rules of an establishment, perhaps not as cloning ourselves within the same department, and not as creating prerogatives. Russian tradition endangers the independence of scientific knowledge and scholars as creating a strong tradition of establishment. However, as Zhuravlev, et al. (2009) quoted Bourdieu (1984), introduced the notion of "the order of succession" to highlight temporal gaps between successive academic positions, according to Bourdieu, temporal gaps between academic qualifications and positions ensure the security of those who occupy top positions in the academic hierarchy and, at the same time, offer younger generations of scholars a chance to "inherit" the positions of the elders, along with their scholarly "traditions", "academic ethos", etc.

Some might argue that to maintain an academic tradition, a department has to hire own graduates as successors, however successors of a tradition may turn into successors and protectors of status quo. In a study, Philips (2009) mentions about Japanese universities' resistance to change and improvement and their conservative traditions, also inbred by "academic incest". He notes that top Japanese universities hire their own graduates as successors to their mentors, and graduates of foreign universities are at a disadvantage. There is also a lack of competition among the universities

themselves. Protectionist policies of Japanese Ministry of Education do not allow productivity either in research or in teaching; competition rather depends on selectivity of their entrance examinations (Philips, 2009). From an ethical perspective, such policies and strict traditions of status quo are clearly detrimental to academia, however successors of the old “academic incest” tradition seem to resist the change.

Encouraging academic inbreeding for the sake of stronger academic tradition may result in closing doors to future successful academicians who graduated from other universities. Ethically, giving equal opportunity to all employees is not possible unless we treat all candidates equally. In fact, even accepting applicants from own graduates may not be fair for other candidates since we already had contact with our graduates, and possibly have personal communication and relations. If academicians are honest in believing change and improvement they should give chance to graduates from other institutions and should even support and encourage candidates with degrees from other institutions. Academic traditions were not created from non-existence, they were also built upon practices, norms, standards, and traditions brought by academicians. Since we cannot claim that academic traditions have come to perfection, stabilized and we do not need change; we have to keep changing academe as learning from others and from each other.

## References

- Ashby, W. R. (1956). *An Introduction to cybernetics*. London: Chapman and Hill.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Homo academicus*. Paris:Minuit.
- Carlan, P. E., Lewis, J. A., & Dial, K. C. (2009). Faculty diversity and program standing in criminology and criminal justice: findings for 31 doctoral programs in 2008. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 20(3), 249-271.
- Monk, G. (2003). Your best hire may be your former student. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(3): B13.
- Page, S. E. (2007). *The difference: how the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools, and societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Patterson, G. (2004). Harmony through diversity: exploring the ecosystem paradigm for higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 26(1), 60-74.
- Philips, J. E. (2009). Recent studies of African history in Japan. *History Compass*, 7(3), 554-565.
- Zhuravlev, O., Kondov, D., & Save'leva, N. (2009). The European University at St. Petersburg: a case study in sociology of post-Soviet knowledge. *Studies in East European Thought*, 61(4), 291-308.