

What truly defines academic success?

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January 28, 2025

UNAM Professor and other *Global Young Academy* members explore global pathways to full professorship

The criteria for assessing researchers for promotion to full professorship, and the incentives they foster, vary widely around the world.

27 January 2025 – A team of 28 researchers, including UNAM astrophysicist Prof. Michael Backes, have published a groundbreaking article in the prestigious journal *Nature*.

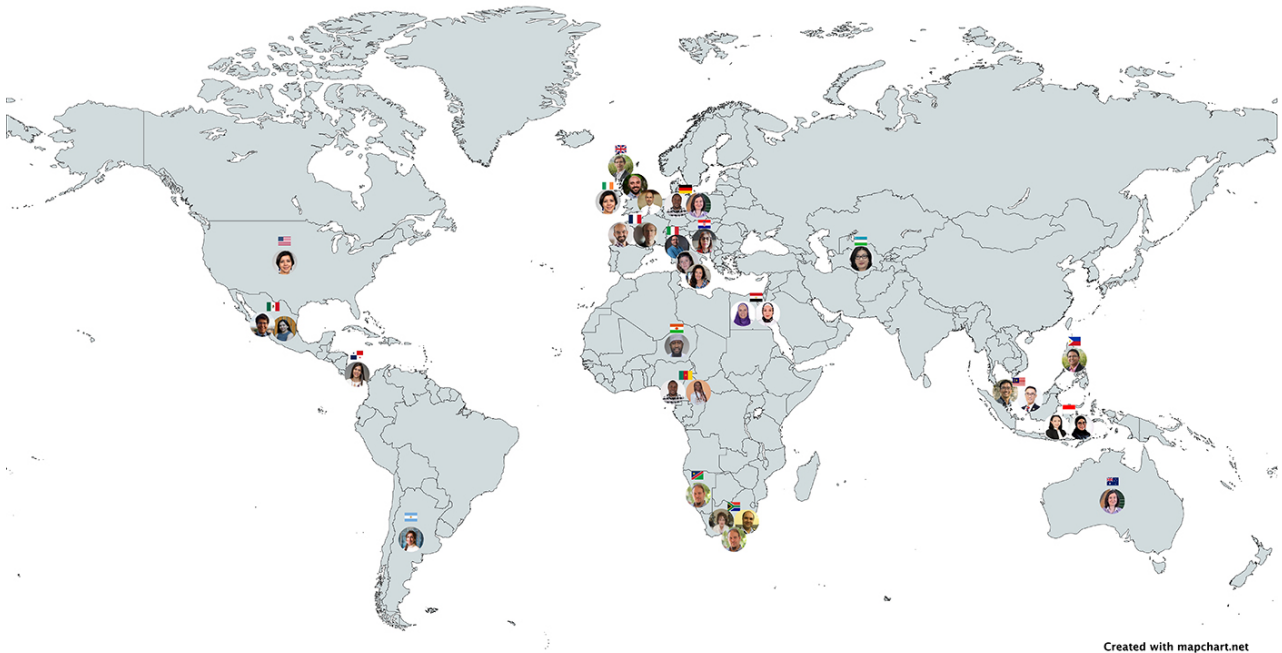
The study, conducted under the Global Young Academy's (GYA) Scientific Excellence working group, investigates how academic success is assessed worldwide and highlights major disparities in evaluation practices.

The team analysed 532 policies (written in 27 languages) from institutions and government agencies in 121 countries to identify how criteria for promotions to full professor are applied.

They found that while metrics like the number of publications dominate, three-quarters of these policies surprisingly do not explicitly reference the number of citations.

Instead, institutions rely on a mix of four key evaluation profiles:

1. **Output metrics** (e.g. number of publications).
2. **Visibility & engagement** (e.g. public outreach and leadership roles).
3. **Career development** (e.g. mentoring and training).
4. **Outcomes & impact** (e.g. contributions to the field or society).



Challenges in Measuring Academic Success

Dr Martin Dominik, (Reader at University of St Andrews, UK), a GYA alumnus and study initiator, emphasised the importance of understanding these differences: “Research institutions around the world are not identical and interchangeable, criteria differ, and anyone interested in a job in academia should be well aware of specificities.”

The study warns that some commonly used metrics, such as simple publication counts, can encourage harmful practices, including fraud, and fail to reflect meaningful contributions.

Prof. Backes noted that these practices are particularly popular in upper-middle-income countries like Namibia: “While institutes in the Global South often try to assess academic merit by simple publication metrics, institutes in high-income countries tend to prioritise qualitative attributes of academics, such as visibility and engagement.”

Inequality in Academic Assessment

The article highlights how these evaluation methods often disadvantage researchers in less-developed countries, creating barriers to innovation and progress.

Dr Yensi Flores Bueso, (University College Cork, IE & University of Washington, USA), GYA Co-Chair, stressed the need for change: “I hope that this work provides a foundation to rethink policies so that they foster equity, inclusivity, and research integrity as fundamental pillars of our research culture, and that, consequently, science can serve as a common good for humanity as a whole.”

The full article is available here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-024-08422-9>

About the Global Young Academy

The vision of the GYA is *science for all; science for the future*, and its mission is to give a voice to young scientists and researchers around the world. The GYA, founded in 2010, is an independent science academy of 200 outstanding early- to mid-career researchers from six continents who are selected from across disciplines based on their academic excellence and commitment to engage with society. GYA members serve five-year terms, and the GYA presently counts members and alumni from 101 countries. The GYA administrative Office is publicly funded and hosted at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina.

Prof. Michael Backes, a co-author of the study, is an alumnus of the GYA and served two years on its executive committee. In 2018, he was the first ever scientist from Namibia to be selected as a member of this prestigious learned society. Currently, two of the 200 members are from Namibia: Prof. Mareli Claassens (since 2021) and Dr Elina Amadhila (since 2023). All three are staff members of the University of Namibia.

UNAM is the only Namibian university in the 2024 Times Higher Education Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings, securing 13th place among 129 universities from 22 countries.

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