Fighting Intellectual Unemployment: The League of Nations, Marie Curie, and Social Inequalities in Higher Education

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I. Introduction

> The expression 'market for intellectual employment,' which the reader will encounter frequently in the following pages, has only recently come into use. The very existence of such a 'market' passed unnoticed until it ceased to function smoothly.

These sentences were written in 1940 when the "market" no longer functioned but was in a "morbid condition." Before the First World War, finding a position "appropriate to their training" was relatively straightforward for university graduates, a growing number of women among them. By 1940, the times of a "happy balance between supply and demand"— the economic terminology remains striking — were over. The public had to learn to grapple with "intellectual unemployment," which was particularly problematic because its "victims" suffer a specific form of shame "which other unemployed people do not experience in the same degree." This was especially dangerous because the situation caused dissatisfaction among those who were endowed with "superior intellectual equipment."[1] The report concluded that with

1 International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, ed. *The Future of Graduates. The Investigation and Forecasting of Opportunities for Intellectual Employment* (Paris, 1940), 9.

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Figure 1. Entrance of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Paris, undated. Unknown photographer. Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine - Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication. Public domain.

their skills and connections unemployed academics were able to turn their personal problem into a political one. They could portray their own social dilemma as a symptom of a supposedly "degenerate" state, threatening its legitimacy. In other words, unemployed academics became a problem for the democracies of the world.

The report from which I am quoting here was published by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation in 1940. In 1924, the Institute was placed under the authority of the French government and entrusted to the League of Nations in order to assume the administrative responsibilities of the League's International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. This arrangement was subject to the condition that the Institute be headquartered in Paris and headed by a French director. Although the Institute formally continued to exist during the German occupation of Paris, it effectively ceased to undertake any new activities. The 1940 report thus constituted virtually the last publication for which the Institute bore responsibility before its functions, archives, furnishings, and a number of its staff members were absorbed into the newly established UNESCO after 1945.

The data collection for the report had been initiated prior to the war, starting in 1937.[2] Its purpose was not only to define the "intellectual labor market" but also to present, in an internationally comparable format, the situation of male and female university graduates who had not managed to secure a position. The hope

2 See folders R4044/5B/26949 which include enquiries into the situation of unemployed academics in several countries and the attempts to generate general assumptions from these national reports.

was to find – through international agreement and cooperation – a way to remedy this problem, which was not only perceived as an individual issue but above all as a general societal and especially a political problem.[3]

A quasi-paradisiacal world of the past in which the academic world was still in order and everyone could find a position that suited their training is, of course, an illusion.[4] Yet even if the problem was not new, one can observe a rising awareness of "academic unemployment" in the twentieth century, particularly once the phenomenon came to be framed as a threat to political stability.[5] In this article I examine the strategies that were developed to cope with the instability of academic employment. These efforts were carried out by institutions that wanted to address the problem not only in a nation-state framework, but from a supranational perspective[6] – that of the League of Nations and those of its subsidiary organizations that were devoted to the topic of intellectual cooperation.[7] The League of Nations was founded after the devastations of the First World War in 1919/20 as an international organization whose aim was to promote international cooperation and achieve international peace and security based on the tenets of international law. By the time the cited report appeared (1940), however, the League was increasingly regarded, not without reason, as a failed institution.[8]

In this article I investigate how, and for what reasons, the League of Nations engaged with the question of academic unemployment as a global problem. In doing so I will focus on the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, set up by the League of Nations in 1922, which was tasked with precisely such questions. I start by highlighting the significance of academic unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s. In the next section I introduce the organization

3 International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, ed. *Future of Graduates*, 9.

4 For the early modern period, for example, see Franz Quarthal, "Öffentliche Armut, Akademikerschwemme und Arbeitslosigkeit im Zeitalter des Barock," in Volker Press, ed., *Barock am Oberrhein* (Karlsruhe, 1985), 153–188.

5 For the Weimar Republic, see Konrad Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions. German Lawyers, Teachers, and Engineers, 1900–1950* (New York, 1990).

6 For a definition of "supranational organizations," see Kiran Klaus Patel, "Zeitgeschichte Europas als supranationale Geschichte?" *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 72 (2024): 303 – 315.

7 Jean-Jacques, *L'Unesco oubliée. La Société des Nations et la cooperation intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris, 1999); Jonathan Voges, "Wissenschaftler als Diplomaten. Der Völkerbund und die internationale geistige Zusammenarbeit in den 1920er Jahren," *Acta Historica Leopoldina* 73 (2021): 121–138; Jonathan Voges, "Internationale Experten in eigener Sache? Der Völkerbund und die Organisation der geistigen Zusammenarbeit in der Zwischenkriegszeit," in Felix Selgert, ed., *Externe Experten in Politik und Wirtschaft* (Berlin, 2020), 223–243.

8 For a recent introduction to the history of the League of Nations, see Michel Marbeau, *La Société des Nations. Vers un monde multilateral, 1919 – 1946* (Tours, 2017); Ruth B. Henig, *The Peace that Never Was. A History of the League of Nations* (London, 2019).

and its activities, especially with regard to its attention to the situation at universities around the world. In the final section I discuss the efforts of one of its prominent members, Marie Curie, who, beginning in the mid-1920s, developed a project that promised to address academic unemployment, which ultimately failed.

II. "La grande crise actuelle": Academic Unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s

The survey upon which the publication on the future prospects of university graduates was based was launched in 1937 under the working title *Unemployment among Intellectuals*.[9] From the outset, this framing made clear that the study was primarily concerned with negatively inflected futures — exclusion and marginalization – rather than successful professional careers. As the *rapporteur* noted before the Assembly of the League of Nations: "The growth of unemployment amongst young intellectuals in the different countries has been discussed in detail by the committee." The task now, he continued, was "to draw the attention of Governments to this delicate problem, and to suggest that they take such national steps as may seem necessary to them."[10] In order to establish the precise scope of the problem, a "circular letter on this question" was to be distributed to the member states (as well as selected non-members such as the United States and Germany), and the League expressed its hope that the inquiry would have a "practical value . . . for fighting against the unemployment of the *jeunes diplômés*."[11]

Whereas states such as Siam or the Australian federal states responded to the League's inquiry by emphasizing "that unemployment among university youths in this country [Siam] does not yet present a problem, which warrants the taking of any action in the matter,"[12] others — particularly those industrialized nations most severely affected by the economic crisis of the 1930s — acknowledged the significance of the issue within their own borders. Concern about graduate unemployment was widespread at the international level as well, featuring, for example, promi-

9 Intellectuals meaning all employees working in professions that either needed a scientific or an artistic training, mainly graduates from universities.

10 Communication to the Council, September 10, 1936. League of Nations Archives. C.375.1936.XII.

11 Société des Nations, *Travaux de l'organisation de coopération intellectuelle. Rapport soumis par la septième Commission a l'Assemblée* (Geneva, 1938), 5.

12 Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Secretary of the League of Nations, June 14, 1937. League of Nations Archives, Unemployment among Intellectuals. Enquiry started on January 25th, 1937. Siam. R4044.

nently in the Committee of International Student Organizations, which maintained close ties to the League of Nations.[13]

At the heart of the problem was a development that can be illustrated by the case of Germany. During the 1920s, university enrollment expanded dramatically. By 1931, there were 158.8 university students per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 89.9 in 1913 and 94.4 in 1925.[14] As a result, university graduates – mainly in the humanities but increasingly even in the natural sciences – began to struggle to secure appropriate employment upon completing their degrees. This tendency was further reinforced by the fact that the pull of favorable admission conditions encouraging young people to enter higher education was stronger than the push of unfavorable labor market prospects that might have discouraged them from doing so.[15] In other words, even when the number of positions available for qualified graduates no longer kept pace with demand, student enrollment did not decline proportionately, which exacerbated the problem over time. A broadly similar situation prevailed in France, where intellectual unemployment had been discussed by organizations representing intellectual workers since the 1920s under the slogan *la grande crise actuelle*. During the 1930s, these groups campaigned for the introduction of unemployment benefits for intellectual workers, which provoked heated parliamentary debates but failed to produce any tangible results.[16]

The issue was international in scope, albeit with important exceptions (Siam and Australia being just two), while manifesting itself in nationally specific forms. Correspondingly, the debates surrounding graduate and intellectual unemployment became increasingly internationalized. The League of Nations — and, more specifically, its International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation — served as an important vehicle for this process of internationalization. It did so, first, through the aforementioned inquiry, which sought to collect, compare, and systematize information on academic unemployment across different national contexts. Second, it promoted a series of initiatives that helped pave the way for this project.

13 Société des Nations/Institut international de cooperation intellectuelle, *Rapport sur la onzième session du comité des representatives des organisations internationales d'étudiants*, May 1936. League of Nations Archives, Committee of Representatives of International Student Organisations. R3983

14 Volker Müller-Benedict, Axel Nath, and Hartmut Titze, "Universitätsbesuch und akademischer Arbeitsmarkt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," in Helmut Heid and Wolfgang Klafki, eds., *Arbeit – Bildung – Arbeitslosigkeit. Beiträge zum 9. Kongreß der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* (Weinheim, 1985), 68–76; 69.

15 Ibid., 73.

16 Alain Chatriot, "La lutte contre le 'chômage intellectuel.' L'action de la Confédération des Travailleurs Intellectuels (CTI) face à la crise des années trente," *Le Mouvement Social* 214 (2006): 77–91.

III. The League of Nations Commission and the Crisis of Universities after 1918

Alongside the lofty goal of making future wars impossible, the *Statute of the League of Nations* also included the mandate that the new international organization should devote itself to promoting international cooperation.[17] The text of the Statute lists several areas for cooperation more or less randomly: combating the trafficking of women, cooperation in public health, and other topics. Intellectual cooperation – that is, culture and science – was not mentioned, however.[18] At the very first Assembly of the League of Nations, French delegate Léon Bourgeois therefore proposed a plan for an "International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation" for the next session.[19] After some changes in name and scope of tasks, the Commission was established in 1922. It would initially have twelve members, among them such illustrious figures as Henri Bergson, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein.[20] The goal of the Commission was to devise instruments by which intellectual cooperation on an international scale could be promoted. Initially, a division dedicated to the administrative preparation and follow-up of the Commission's tasks was set up in the Secretariat of the League of Nations.[21] Then, in 1925, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, based in Paris, was established to assist with the Commission's growing administrative duties.[22]

The Institute's tasks were broadly defined and included promoting study abroad semesters among students, creating international bibliographic reference works,[23] and drafting concrete proposals

17 The Peace Treaty of Versailles, signed June 28, 1919. Part I: The Covenant of the League of Nations. https://www.ungeneva.org/en/about/league-of-nations/covenant (accessed March 12, 2026).

18 Through UNESCO, the UN sought to integrate culture, science and education into its portfolio from the very beginning after 1945. Poul Duedahl, *A History of UNESCO. Global Actions and Impacts* (New York, 2018).

19 Léon Bourgeois, *Organization of Intellectual Work. Council of the League of Nations – Report Presented by Mr. Léon Bourgeois, Representative of France*. League of Nations Archives. R1029/13C/15363/14297.

20 Margarete Rothbarth, "Internationale geistige Zusammenarbeit," in Julius Hatschek and Karl Strupp, eds., *Wörterbuch des Völkerrechts und der Diplomatie Volume 3* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1929), 873-884.

21 For an early overview of the work of the secretariat, see L. Krabbe, "Le Secrétariat Général de la Société des Nations et son Activité," in Paul Munch, ed., *Les Origines et L'œuvre de la Société des Nations. Volume II* (Copenhagen, 1924), 264-282.

22 Margarethe Rothbarth, "Das Institut für geistige Zusammenarbeit in Paris," *Völkerbundfragen* 3 (1926): 134-139.

23 Jonathan Voges, "The Role of Bibliographic Indices for Knowledge Circulation," Wiebke Keim, Leandro Rodriguez Medina, Rigas Arvanitis, et al. eds., *Routledge Handbook of Academic Knowledge Circulation* (London, 2023), 214–222.



Figure 2. International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (League of Nations). Plenary session in the Palais des Nations, August 1939. Unknown photographer. United Nations Archives in Geneva, League of Nations Pictures, File CM 075. CC 4.0

for League of Nations-inspired schooling worldwide.[24] Since many of those in charge — in both the Commission and in its administrative branches — were (or had been) members of universities, it is not surprising that universities played a particularly important role in their portfolio of tasks.[25] Several members of the Committee had themselves traversed difficult paths before reaching the positions from which they were appointed to the Commission as distinguished intellectuals. The most striking example is Marie Curie, who shortly after her appointment would seek to develop a structural solution to at least one aspect of the problem of academic unemployment. Not only was she subject to the structural discrimination faced by women. At the time of her studies in the late nineteenth century, higher education for women was neither institutionally consolidated nor was it generally considered conceivable that a woman might one day become a university professor. Moreover, from the outset, Curie's scientific career was

24 Jonathan Voges, "„Moralische Abrüstung" als Grundlage von Völkerversöhnung? Die Völkerbundorganisation für intellektuelle Kooperation und die Bemühungen um einen dauerhaften Frieden in den 1920er und 1930er Jahren," in Corinne Defrance, Jürgen Finger, Ulrich Pfeil, eds., *„Versöhnung" zwischen Vergessen und Erinnerung. Geschichte eines bewegten Konzepts. Europa 19. Jahrhundert und erste Hälfte 20. Jahrhundert* (Brussels, 2022), 195–216.

25 Some critics even think that the League of Nations concentrated too much on universities and therefore neglected schools and especially primary schools. See Mark Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea* (London, 2012), 150.

transnational in character. Initially spanning both Poland and France, it subsequently acquired an increasingly international dimension through her connections to the United States and her work within the framework of the League of Nations.

The fact that eminent scholars took on the issue of academic unemployment on behalf of the United Nations had two important consequences: First, some of these professors' own graduates were hired by the Institute or the League of Nations Secretariat, becoming academic service providers who organized and sustained the intellectual cooperation that the League of Nations had set as part of its agenda.[26] Second, as I have examined elsewhere, employment at the UN improved an academic's chances on the domestic academic job market, as it allowed them to demonstrate international experience in subsequent applications. Therefore, members of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation never tired of placing their own students at the institute—or at least attempting to do so.[27]

But the Commission also attempted a structured solution to the problem. The very first official act of the Commission was to initiate a wide-ranging inquiry [*enquête*] that addressed the "situation of intellectual labor" in different countries.[28]

> The Commission, deeply shaken by the reports coming from many sides regarding the condition of intellectual work and of those engaged in intellectual labor, a condition which in some countries seemed to threaten the progress of civilization, resolved for the time being to conduct a general investigation. This was to shed light on the extent of the evil under which intellectual work in various countries and intellectual workers of the various kinds suffered.[29]

Based on the Commission's resolution, the Secretariat Division in Geneva developed a questionnaire, which was sent to relevant authorities in the nation-states, asking for information about the condition of their academic and cultural institutions. The Commission published the replies in a series of booklets that now provide a rich resource for a comparative history of academic life shortly after the First World War.[30] It is important to keep in mind, however, that a standardized questionnaire does not guarantee that

26 Jonathan Voges, "In the Engine Room of Intellectual Cooperation. A Prosopographical Approach to the Civil Servants of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in Paris," in Martin Grandjean and Daniel Laqua, eds., *Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations. Shaping Cultural and Political Relations* (Geneva, 2025), 75–84.

27 Jonathan Voges, "'An able and clever person' – mit Beziehungen. Akademische Patronage und Abhängigkeiten am Beispiel des Internationalen Instituts für geistige Zusammenarbeit in Paris," *Werkstatt-Geschichte* 92 (2025): 51–65.

28 Jonathan Voges, "An International Survey of "Kopfarbeit"? The League of Nations and the *Enquête sur la situation du travail intellectuel* in the 1920s," *Central European History* [forthcoming].

29 Nachrichtenabteilung des Völkerbundes, ed., *Der Völkerbund und die geistige Zusammenarbeit* (Geneva, 1927), 16. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

30 In addition to the published reports, see the folders in Enquiry into intellectual Life. S405. Archives of the League of Nations.

all respondents understood the requested information in the same way. Also, very different bodies and individuals in each country responded to the League's request.[31]

The questionnaire could also be used strategically. To the newly formed nation-states of East-Central and Southeastern Europe, it was important to assert through their responses that their new states were underpinned by an independent, culturally elevated, unified national culture.[32] Among the countries whose economy had been particularly gravely affected by the First World War was Hungary.[33] The report devoted to Hungarian institutions of higher education made clear that the financial situation of even the country's largest university — the University of Budapest — was ruinous. "Hungary . . . has to encounter difficulties of an extraordinarily grave character";[34] established professors earned so little that they did not know how to support their families; new books could not be acquired ("It is in this branch that the situation is most hopeless"); equipment could not be kept up to date, could sometimes not even be repaired.[35] At the same time, student enrollment had been rising since 1920, while the number of faculty members was shrinking.[36] Thus the academic career path narrowed, especially since national and travel stipends did not keep pace with Hungarian inflation; in fact, travel stipends had lost all significance because it was no longer possible to travel abroad with what the Hungarian state paid. If tenured and salaried professors were already suffering, the situation for the next generation looked far more precarious.[37] The League's Commission — and above all Marie Curie — wanted to aid future scholars to attain financial stability.

IV. Creating a Decent Life for Academics: Marie Curie's Scholarship Plans

Biographical research on Marie Curie usually maintains that she refrained from political statements.[38] During the First World War,

31 The Commission for Hygiene had the same problem while collecting the data for the Health Yearbooks. See Iris Borowy, "World Health in a Book. The Internationalist Health Yearbooks," in Iris Borowy and Wolf D. Gruner, eds., *Facing Illness in Troubled Times. Health in Europe in the Interwar Years, 1918-1939* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 85–127.

32 For an overview of different nation states, see Michaela Maier, Maria Mesner, Robert Kriechbaumer et al., eds., *Die Krisen der Demokratie in den 1920er und 1930er Jahren. Spanien – Portugal – Italien – Jugoslawien – Ukraine – Ungarn – Rumänien – Polen – Österreich* (Wien, 2023).

33 Zsolt Nagy, *Great Expectations and Interwar Realities. Cultural Diplomacy in Horthy's Hungary* (Budapest/New York, 2022).

34 Geza de Daruváry, *The Situation of Intellectual Workers in Hungary. Reply to the Questionnaire of the Intellectual Co-operation Commission of the League of Nations* (London, 1923), 5.

35 Ibid., 6.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 23.

38 For a first attempt to evaluate Curie's activities as part of the Commission – without any reference to the scholarship program – see Eva Hemmung Wirtén, *Making Marie Curie. Intellectual Property & Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information* (Chicago, 2015).

however, she expressed her clear commitment to France in its war against Germany, and she also was an outspoken advocate for women's rights — in particular, for women in science, who were long – and in many areas continue to be[39] – forced out of academia despite their academic achievements.[40] Curie's appointment to the Commission was almost inevitable because the statute explicitly required that women also be appointed,[41] and in the early 1920s there were few women with scientific credentials as outstanding as Nobel Laureate Curie's. While Curie had lived in Paris for decades, she still held Polish citizenship. Thus, her presence *de facto* made the French influence in the Commission stronger, but *de jure* she could be considered as the representative of an East-Central European country.[42] The Commission and Marie Curie took a special interest in a group we refer to as "postdocs" today: doctoral graduates who, after receiving their degree, decided to strive for a university career. Already in the early 1920s, the path toward a permanent professorship was quite difficult, as was so eloquently described by Max Weber.[43]

Curie explicitly introduced natural science topics into the Commission's work. For example, along with Albert Einstein and physicist Hendrik A. Lorentz, who was also the president of the Commission, she advocated for the establishment of an international meteorological institute.[44] Another matter in which she took a particular interest was the recruitment of qualified scientific junior staff. In 1926, Curie put the matter of scholarships for postgraduates on the Commission's agenda; the Secretary of the Commission, Georges Oprescu, immediately asked her to produce an exposé on this topic.[45] Since Curie had been assured that, beyond the meetings in Geneva, no other tasks would be assigned to her, this request might have come as a surprise. Her role was supposed to

39 See Jenna P. Carpenter, ed., *Women in Academia* (Chams, 2026).

40 See for example Iwona Dadej, *Beruf und Berufung international. Deutsche und polnische Akademikerinnen in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Osnabrück, 2019); Christine von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism. Women's Academic Networks, 1917–1955* (New York, 2014); Britta Lohscheider, *„Die Knäbin mit dem Doktortitel". Akademikerinnen in der Weimarer Republik* (Pfaffenweiler, 1994).

41 "Its members, who—by explicit resolution—were also to include women, consisted of 12 (later 14) scholars who were selected on the basis of their scientific significance, without regard to nationality." Rothbarth, "Internationale geistige Zusammenarbeit," 874.

42 For a critique, see Otto Soehring, *Völkerbund und internationale wissenschaftliche Beziehungen. Vier Rundfunk-Vorträge gehalten für die "Deutsche Welle"* (Leipzig, 1927).

43 Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Berlin,[9]1991).

44 Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and Hendrik A. Lorentz, "The Establishment of an International Bureau of Meteorology" *Science* 65 (1927): 415–417.

45 Georges Oprescu to Marie Curie, 23 March 1926. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Papers of Marie Curie: XCIX Société des Nations – Swajcer.

be mainly representative.[46] Curie, however, well aware where the major wealthy foundations that could decisively support a scholarship program of the envisaged scale were located, namely, the United States, dispatched her paper accordingly, possibly intending to inform interested parties in the United States about the Commission's plans – even before the issue had in fact become an official Commission topic.[47]

Directly referring to the *enquête,*[48] Curie presented a plan centered on support for graduate university affiliates. Confidently, Curie emphasized the great importance of science for humanity:

> I shall devote but few words to a declaration of faith in the importance of science for humanity. If that importance has sometimes been discussed, and if words such as 'the failure of science' have been uttered in the bitterness of discouragement, it is because humanity's effort toward its most beautiful aspirations is imperfect like all that is human and has often been diverted from its way by forces of national selfishness and social regression.[49]

The scholarship program proposed by Curie was intended to address both above-mentioned problems — national selfishness and social challenges — together. For Curie, nothing less than the future of humanity depended on the financial security of early career scholars: "It is in this spirit that the question of scholarships will be considered here, which I hope our Commission will pay all the attention it deserves." For "the protection of scientific vocations is a sacred duty for every society concerned about its future."

Curie considered two categories of persons eligible: first, category 1 for those who had made a name for themselves with their initial research and who therefore had good prospects for advancement to regular employment — but who were as yet without a permanent position: "Give working means to advanced scientists who would already have made themselves known by scientific works guaranteeing their aptitudes."

The second category comprised those whose prospects were not yet equally guaranteed, those who merely stood out from the crowd

46 Curie had explicitly noted in her reply to the invitation that she was not certain whether her university obligations and her health would allow her to participate in the commission (Curie to Drummond, 1 June 1922). The Secretary-General of the League of Nations, however, assured her that the work of the commission would certainly not conflict with her other activities: 'it will moreover be entirely up to the members themselves to determine the programme and scope of this work' (Eric Drummond to Marie Curie, 7 June 1922). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Papers of Marie Curie: XCIX Société des Nations – Swajcer.

47 Curie to Oprescu, 11 June 1926. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Papers of Marie Curie: XCIX Société des Nations – Swajcer.

48 She explicitly referred to "the state of mind of intellectuals of various countries, as it was revealed by the recent war." Marie Curie, untitled and undated draft for an international scholarship programme. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Papers of Marie Curie: XCIX Société des Nations – Swajcer.

49 For all subsequent quotes from Curie, see previous fn.

by recommendation from their "maîtres" [doctoral supervisors] or by their graduation grades: "Give to all candidates animated by the desire to devote some time to science a chance to develop their aptitudes, under the sole guarantee of being recommended by their supervisors or by the academic diplomas obtained." Curie also made clear that these categories were not always clearly separable; the aim had to be to move persons from category 1 into category 2. Graduates who had passed through scholarship category 1 should form the pool from which further scholars could be recruited: "Note that while the first category of candidates appears more interesting, the second is obviously larger."

What was new about Curie's plan was that the scholarships offered should not be a national affair alone — rather, she demanded an "international organization of scholarships," which should allow laboratories (her plan concerned only the natural sciences) to disburse funds to those persons deemed suitable by them: "Internationality would be assured by the removal of clauses relating to the nationality of the scholar."

This would mean that laboratories and universities could become centers of international science. "It is in the interest of a laboratory to receive workers in order to broaden its action and the extent of its service to society." This also meant that Curie did not want the scholarships to be understood solely as an act of benevolence toward the graduates. Rather she made it clear that laboratories would receive something in return for their investment of "economic capital," to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrasing. In addition to benefitting from the labor of the scholar recipient, laboratories would bolster their scientific reputation ("cultural capital") and above all also increase their international networking ("social capital").[50] Curie emphasized this last point as especially important for modern science.

Curie's plan envisaged two different classes of scholarships: Full scholarships for young scientists designed to enable the recipients to maintain a modest but sufficient standard of living — "without any other resources."[51] Travel costs were to be covered by the schol-

50 Pierre Bourdieu, "Ökonomisches, kulturelles und soziales Kapital." Pierre Bourdieu, *Die verborgenenen Mechanismen der Macht* (Hamburg, 1992), 49–75.

51 Curie, Draft for international scholarship programme. Subsequent quotes ibid.

arship as well. Its main purpose was to open university careers to a broader demographic who could not rely on family wealth. In return, the recipient was to undertake all tasks that the director of the laboratory deemed important. That director, in turn, was to supervise the work of his (or in fewer cases her) protégé, jointly prepare publications, and submit an annual report to the foundation. The duration of the scholarship was to be one year with the possibility of extension. A maximum of two extensions up to a total of three years could be granted — by then it would have to be decided whether the recipient had qualified for a second category of scholarship. For this second type of scholarship, extensions were always to be possible "to any worker [travailleur] who deserves them."[52] These therefore took the role of consolidator grants. This option, however, meant that the researchers receiving these scholarships, who were often already advanced in age, remained in a limited-term position instead of securing a permanent appointment at a university or research institution.

Curie concluded that both sides would ultimately benefit: The institution would gain a qualified specialist at the expense of the scholarship provider, and some of the scholars — Curie was well aware that not all could follow the path into science — "would show more rare aptitudes and it would be fitting to encourage them to pursue a scientific career." For researchers, the time at their chosen institute would afford the opportunity to make a name for themselves through publications (in most cases jointly with the supervisor) and thereby increase their "employability," to use a contemporary term.[53]

I shall not go further into another class of scholarships here; Curie only treats it in passing, but she intended also to open paths for established scientists to spend some time at research institutions abroad. With regard to the question of social inequalities within universities as workplaces, however, the first category is far more significant. It explicitly addressed two forms of social inequality: first, family-based economic circumstances. Academic careers were no longer to depend on the availability — or absence — of such financial resources when it came to the advancement of young

52 Curie consistently referred to the academics in question as "*travailleurs*" (workers), totally in line with the phrasing of the League of Nation Committee. The reason for this was to make intellectual work visible as work and, in a second step, to demand improvements for the situation of intellectual workers.

53 For the present, see Thies Johannsen, *Die Zukunft akademischer Berufe. Innovation durch Transferkompetenz in der Hochschulbildung* (Bielefeld, 2025).



Figure 3. Marie Curie and four female students, c. 1910. Photo: Bain News Service. Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection.

scholars.[54] Second, it addressed the differences that existed between individual nation-states by seeking to enable each applicant to work in the location most conducive to their research. These attempts to compensate for social imbalances through scholarships, however, came into effect relatively late in a student's academic trajectory, namely, only after their completion of an advanced degree.

The lack of academic opportunities for women was a form of inequality that Curie addressed more implicitly. From her own experience, she knew that women, in particular, often lacked familial support for pursuing a (permanent) university position.[55] With the scholarship system she developed, Curie sought precisely to decouple the support of promising candidates from their families' financial means and willingness to provide assistance. For women at universities in particular, this meant being able to continue their studies without having to rely on their families' approval of, or support for, higher education for women; academic merit alone was intended to determine eligibility for support.

54 Biographers from socialist countries even wrote that Curie was explicitly interested in the fate of children from peasants and workers' families – even though there is no hint in the sources that would support such a proto-socialist understanding of her scholarship program. Olgierd Wołczek, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie und ihre Familie* (Leipzig, 1978), 133.

55 For Curie's work for women in science, see Michel Pinault, "Marie Curie, une intellectuelle engagée?" *Clio* 24 (2007): 1-13; 4.

As requested, Marie Curie submitted her memorandum in printed form in 1926 for discussion by the Commission. Like all discussion papers of the League of Nations, it was made publicly accessible.[56] The Commission did what it often did and established an expert commission to examine the question. This process alone took several years. Besides Curie herself, the committee included: German political scientist Arnold Bergsträsser, a founding member of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and connoisseur of France;[57] Jules Duesberg, first rector of the University of Liège (Belgium); eminent Slavicist Louis Eisenmann representing the Office Nationale des Universités et des Écoles Francaises; jurist Massimo Pilotti, Italian delegate at the Institute in Paris; English biochemist Ida Smedley of the International Federation of University Women;[58] and W. E. Tisdale of the Rockefeller Foundation.[59] While its members' professional backgrounds varied widely, their geographical locations did not: the Global South was not represented at all, neither was Asia. This was, however, not unusual for the work of the Committee. Although it was acknowledged that universities and university-trained individuals modelled on Western institutions had by then emerged in other parts of the world, Western models nevertheless remained the benchmark. The selection of experts made clear that it would primarily be universities in the Global North that had something to offer prospective candidates — not only their particular modes of conducting research, but also the necessary financial resources. These institutions were not merely assumed to serve as models; they were expected to become integral to the higher education of not only their own students but also those arriving from elsewhere.

The experts' commission presented its report in 1930.[60] Throughout it made clear that precisely because of the continuing economic crises, especially after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, it was becoming ever more difficult to attract academically trained persons to work in science because they pursued more lucrative careers. This

56 Société des Nations/Commission de Coopération intellectuelle, ed., *Mémorandum de Mme Curie de la Commission sur la question des bourses internationales, pour l'avancement des sciences et le développement des laboratoires* (Geneva, 1926).

57 Volkhard Laitenberger, "Der DAAD von seinen Anfängen bis 1945," in Peter Alter, ed., *Der DAAD in der Zeit. Geschichte, Gegenwart und zukünftige Aufgaben – vierzehn Essays* (Berlin, 2000), 21-48; Volkhard Laitenberger, "Theorie und Praxis der „Kulturellen Begegnung zwischen den Nationen" in der deutschen auswärtigen Kulturpolitik der 30er Jahre" *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 31 (1981): 196-206.

58 On the federation, see von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism*.

59 See Helke Rausch, "US-amerikanische „Scientific Philantropy" in Frankreich, Deutschland und Großbritannien zwischen den Weltkriegen" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 33 (2007): 73-98.

60 Réunion d'experts pour la question des bourses d'études post-universitaires à l'Institut international de coopération intellectuelle, Paris, le 17 mars 1930, à 10 heures du matin. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Papers of Marie Curie LXXVII Documents concernant le Comité de Coopération intellectuelle de la Société des Nations.

situation, the commission argued, presented "a real and pressing danger for the future of science." The report also stressed that to maintain the current "level of scientific culture" it was absolutely necessary to develop institutions that could sustain "an elite engaged purely in research."

The establishment of the scholarship system proposed by Curie was thus welcomed — with some limitations — and formally endorsed in a resolution, which called for the following measures:

1. "by all appropriate means" to enable young academics to pursue a university career;
2. to provide them with scholarships that allow "a decent existence free from material worries";
3. to open scholarships to foreign applicants as well as to nationals (here the resolution did not go as far as Curie's proposal, which had called for a strictly international scholarship system);
4. to create bilateral scholarship systems that would permit exchange of scholars between individual states (a watered-down version of Curie's plea for international academic mobility);
5. to prepare a publication listing all existing scholarships in the different countries.[61]

As was perhaps to be expected after the resurgence of nationalist sentiment during the Depression era,[62] the experts gathered in Paris did indeed make concessions with respect to the grand international ambition that Curie had formulated in her initial considerations. What they continued to affirm, however, was the importance of postdoctoral scholarships in order to retain promising candidates within academia.[63]

As with so many projects of the League's Commission, however, the scholarship system subsequently faltered, as, in the 1930s, it became increasingly difficult for the message of international cooperation to be heard,[64] and the economic situation made it not particularly attractive for national governments to invest further funds in universities.[65] Nevertheless, the League's efforts document both the issue of academic unemployment in the interwar period

61 Société des Nations/Institut international de coopération intellectuelle. Réunion d'experts pour la question des bourses post-universitaires (Paris, 17 mars 1930). Résolution unique. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Papers of Marie Curie. LXXVII Documents concernant le Comité de Coopération intellectuelle de la Société des Nations.

62 Paul Jankowski, *All Against All. The Long Winter of 1933 and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York, 2020).

63 Résolution unique.

64 For the case of fascist Italy, see Elisabetta Tollardo, *Fascist Italy and the League of Nations, 1922–1935* (London, 2016).

65 Jan-Otmar Hesse, Roman Köster, and Werner Plumpe, *Die Große Depression. Die Weltwirtschaftskrise 1929–1939* (Frankfurt am Main, 2014).

and the awareness of it among those seeking to effect change. They not only possessed first-hand experience derived from their own professional careers, but also maintained close contact with students, serving as university teachers and supervisors of doctoral research. Beyond these admittedly anecdotal forms of knowledge, however, their membership in the Committee provided them with access to statistically generated information on the conditions of academic labor across a wide range of countries. This enabled them to situate their personal experiences within a broader social framework – and to do so on a global scale.

The Committee's efforts also show that there were indeed attempts to remedy this situation and that these sought international solutions for a phenomenon observable on an international scale. The failure of these plans was undoubtedly due, at least in part, to the specific circumstances of the 1930s. The continuing global economic crisis left politicians with little inclination to allocate scarce resources to international students rather than to their own constituencies. At the same time, growing numbers of scholars – regardless of age – were compelled to go abroad and, often without any support from the League of Nations organization, seek opportunities for employment in unfamiliar university systems.[66]

Remarkably, no trace of the League of Nations' scholarship program, developed over a number of years, appears to survive in any national archival record. Nor does Curie's proposal reappear in the League's own documentation, despite the fact that the organization continued to engage with the issues she had raised, as evidenced by the survey conducted in 1937.

V. Conclusion: Some Degree of Order in Academic Careers

> At this post-university stage of their lives, the young students whom science attracts find themselves faced with pressing necessities. More often than not the family has done everything it could to bring the young man or young woman to this stage and, unable to make further sacrifices, asks them to make do.[67]

66 See for example the findings of the GHI Washington project "In Global Transit," https://www.ghi-dc.org/research/history-of-migration/in-global-transit

67 Curie, *Draft for an International Scholarship Programme*.

In this passage Marie Curie was certainly drawing on her own experience.[68] When she campaigned for her scholarship program, she pointed not just to individual hardship but also offered a socio-political perspective: "Thus every nation loses each year a large part of the rarest and most precious vital sap."[69]

The League of Nations' efforts document an awareness of social inequality in higher education in the 1920s and early 1930s not only among academics but also within the League of Nations. With hindsight, the concern that young graduates facing unemployment or having to take positions not corresponding to their training not only signified a waste of intellectual resources but might alienate these young people from liberal democracy proved a rather perceptive observation.

At the same time, the counter-measures proposed by Curie also point to problems of academic precarity that continue to shape the lives of those who choose a career in academia to this day: dependence on the good will of a single person – in Curie's plan the director of the laboratory – still appears as a patronage relationship. The postponed final decision about who may stay in the academic system, and who may not, also appears in Curie's plan; here the scholarship is in effect an extension of the precarious state. But it also includes the promise to make careers more plannable: proving oneself to a professor abroad, joint publications, and the aforementioned advocacy of an established scientist as elements meant to smooth the path into science as a profession. The "marketization" of the university introduced via the concept of the "intellectual labor market" would have been one of its consequences.

Much of what one reads in Curie's problem description and in the League of Nations Institute plan from 1940 therefore seems, unfortunately, very current. This applies, for example, also to the hope of introducing "some degree of order into the movement toward intellectual careers through the reorganization of the educational system."[70] Whether the introduction of a general *numerus clausus* to reduce enrollment, "the creation of placement offices and offices for professional guidance, and the constitution of commissions to

68 See Ulla Fölsing, *Marie Curie, Wegbereiterin einer neuen Naturwissenschaft* (Munich, 1990).

69 Curie, *Draft for an International Scholarship Programme*.

70 International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, ed., *The Future of Graduates*, 10.

study the problem of overcrowding in the universities and in the intellectual professions" are the best available means, as proposed in the 1940 report, is debatable.[71]

The framing of scholarships that Curie proposed, however, is also important for the present: understanding academic research per se as important for humanity; insisting that those who engage in research receive support and that this is not an act of charity but a reciprocation to those who have already made their contribution to academic research and society and wish to continue doing so: "In the case of scholars, the regulations should be more generous since such persons have already rendered services to science."[72]

71 Ibid.

72 Curie, *Draft for an International Scholarship Programme.*

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