
The Academic Profession: A Common Core, a Diversified Group or an Outdated Idea?

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Major tensions affecting the academic profession

The academic profession is the ‘productive workforce’ of higher education institutions and research institutes, the key organizations in society serving the generation, preservation and dissemination of systematic knowledge. There is a general consensus that the academic profession is highly important in a society often characterized as a ‘knowledge society’, both in being responsible for the enhancement of systematic general knowledge and in providing its apex for many professional areas.

Past analyses have shown that four major tensions have led to abundant changes in and constant debates about the situation of the academic profession:

- First, systematic knowledge seems to have become increasingly important for technological progress, economic growth, social wellbeing and cultural enhancement, but this does not guarantee greater public appreciation for or higher self-esteem within the academic profession. On the contrary, academics often believe that in many respects they are losers: they feel socially downgraded, feel that they are no longer the sole carriers of systematic knowledge, lack appropriate conditions for their work and the power to shape their environment, etc.
- Second, the academic profession tends to claim that progress of systematic knowledge is most likely to be achieved if there is

‘academic freedom’, which might be interpreted both as the self-determination of the academic profession in the choice of themes and modes of inquiry and as the pursuit of knowledge not overshadowed by constant pressure to guarantee efficiency and relevance. Yet, the conditions for academic work seem to change dramatically every time we observe contextual dynamics. For example, political priorities in the economic and technological domains have enormous effects on the academy, and trends towards worldwide interconnectedness fundamentally reshape higher education and research institutes, although the academic profession was believed to be international, universalistic and cosmopolitan well before these recent developments.

- Third, in many countries the academic profession has been historically in a strong position to control the respective institutional settings. ‘University autonomy’ often has been viewed as a twin principle of ‘academic freedom’, whereby scholars with a strong voice within universities or research institutes have tried to stabilize their own institution when dealing with governments, ranging from ‘guardian angels’ of academic freedom to intrusive forces of knowledge policies (often combined with detailed administrative supervision or even control of the organisation of the institutions). In recent years, research institutes and institutions of higher education are increasingly controlled by a new managerial class of institutional leaders who claim to be defendants of ‘institutional autonomy’ against external forces, but who also hold enormous internal powers in order to guide academics in the name of quality enhancement, increased societal relevance and efficiency gains.
- Fourth, the academic profession often claims to be a single entity with a common core of values and ethics, as well as similar aspirations and views regarding the quality of academic work. However, in most countries, the profession seems to be divided between senior and the junior professionals more strongly than any other profession. Juniors undergo a very long phase of concurrent learning and academic work. High selectivity is indicative for this phase and is often accompanied with short-term contracts and not infrequently part-time employment. In many countries, both institutional settings and symbols underscore that junior academics can hardly consider themselves as full members of their profession.

Diversification of the academic profession – a timely theme

These issues have often been addressed in conferences aiming to take stock of the situation and possibly recommend improvements. This also holds true for the conference that led to this special issue of the *European Review*, namely the

conference undertaken in Torino (Italy) in March 2009. However, the Torino conference also addressed an issue not sufficiently taken into account on previous similar occasions, namely whether the academic profession becomes more diverse in the process of expansion of the higher education and research system, and if so, to what extent such a process of diversification is beneficial or detrimental for this system.

The conference intended to advance the state of knowledge about such themes as:

- the professional identity or identities of the academic profession;
- the range of employment and remuneration conditions of university professors;
- the varied resources and the differences of academic performance;
- the impact of the various managerial and evaluative practices on the academic profession;
- the growing differences between countries or the converging trends within Europe with respect to the academic profession.

Findings of comparative analyses

In the aforementioned debates, we often hear and read sweeping statements about the conditions, views and activities of the academic profession. However, only a few analyses address this profession systematically. Notably, little is known about the extent to which the views and activities of the academic profession vary or are similar across countries.

Two comparative questionnaire surveys exist, however, that help to understand how scholars perceive their role and situation and how they describe their views and activities. The first study was initiated around 1990 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Princeton, NJ). In 1992, representative surveys were undertaken in 14 countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Russia and the United Kingdom. The second study, ‘The Changing Academic Profession (CAP)’, was initiated around 2005 by various scholars under the leadership of William K. Cummings (George Washington University, Washington, DC). In 2007–2008, about 30,000 academics were surveyed in 18 countries, including Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

The Torino conference in March 2009 seized the opportunity to reflect on the preliminary data analysis and the first results of the second survey, which at the time had not been widely distributed. Has the academic profession really changed as much as the public debates suggest (change with respect to issues such as increasing managerial power, increased expectations that higher education institutions and research institutions should produce visibly relevant results, or

growing internationalisation and ‘globalisation’)? Six of the ten presentations drew from the CAP study and (in part) from the preceding comparative study.

Initiative and support for the conference

Comprising excellent scholars from all disciplines across Europe, the *Academia Europaea* aims to further our knowledge and understanding of the impact of policy and organization on the development of science and scholarship, and, conversely, on the needs of science and scholarship for suitable political and administrative conditions to achieve improvement. In this spirit, symposia have been organized since the mid-1990s that have allowed experts to take stock of our systematic knowledge base regarding the issues at hand and to help develop concepts for future improvement.

In 2004, the *Academia Europaea* formed the expert group on ‘Higher Education, Research and Culture in European Society’ (HERCULES) in order to put initiatives for the reflection about the academic profession on a more regular and stable basis and to undertake analyses and prepare policy statements when and where needed. The HERCULES group, among others, succeeded in making symposia on the situation of higher education and research a regular feature of visible activities of the *Academia Europaea*.

The *Academia Europaea* had already invited experts to reflect on the state of the academic profession before the results of the Carnegie study were made public. This symposium was held in May 1996 at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and led to the book *Inside Academia: New Challenges for the Academic Profession* (Peter A. M. Maassen and Frans A. van Vught (eds); Utrecht: De Tijdstrom, 1996). The proceedings of other conferences initiated by the *Academia Europaea*, partly in cooperation with the International Academy of Education, were published as *Goals and Purposes of Higher Education in the 21st Century* (Arnold Burgen (ed.); London, and Bristol, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1996); *The Impact of Electronic Publishing on the Academic Community* (Ian Butterworth (ed.); London: Portland Press, 1998); *Lifelong Learning: Policy and Research* (Albert Tuijnman and Tom Schuller (eds); London: Portland Press, 1999); *Virtual University? Educational Environments of the Future* (Henk J. van der Molen (ed.); London: Portland Press, 2001); *Excellence in Higher Education* (Erik de Corte (ed.); London: Portland Press, 2003); *The Formative Years of Higher Education* (Ulrich Teichler (ed.); London: Portland Press, 2006); *Quality Assessment for Higher Education in Europe* (Alessandro Cavalli (ed.); London: Portland Press, 2007); *The University and the Market* (Lars Engwall and Denis Weare (eds), London: Portland Press, 2008).

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