Academic Profession, Higher Education Professionals, & Workers

By Jack Our and Abel Berhan

The Invisible Workers (Judy Szekeres, 2004)

Who Are the Administrators?/Why Be Concerned?

- “Those people in universities who have a role that is predominantly administrative in nature, i.e. their focus is about either supporting the work of academic staff, dealing with students on non-academic matters or working in an administrative function such as finance, human resources, marketing, public relations, business development, student administration, academic administration, library, information technology, capital or property” (Szekeres, 2004, p. 7-8)
- University administrators are largely invisible
  - Literature & data
  - University managers
  - Feminized workforce
  - Government publications

The Current Contexts and Discourses

- Increase of surveillance and privatization of universities
  - Neoliberal agenda
  - Public institutions remodeling themselves along commercial lines (corporate managerialism)
- Managerialism
  - Accountability → managerial control
  - “People at the top of the chain of command assume greater importance as they are held responsible for the performance of those reporting to them” (Szekeres, 2004, p. 9-10)
  - Senior management staff & hierarchical decision-making processes
  - Administrative staff might be seen to have more power and credence than academic staff → texts written from the point of view of academics are likely to take a cynical and critical views of administrators

The Current Contexts and Discourses

- Corporatization
  - "Universities adopting corporate structures & modes of operation" (strategic planning, key performance indicators, & program evaluation, etc.) (Szekeres, 2004, p. 10)
  - Development of new administrative units (marketing, business development, human resources, etc.)
    - "Using up resources that could better be used by academic departments" (Szekeres, 2004, p. 10)
  - Administrative staff are seen as having greater importance
- Marketization
  - Intense competition among universities for students, government funds, and corporate dollars
  - Subtheme: the university's activities as *products*
  - Marketing unit

The Current Contexts and Discourses

- Audit
  - All university activities are now considered auditable
  - “Academic staff have behaved as most professions do, having virtually no regulations over their work but rather self-regulating through behavioral norms embedded in their discipline” (slowly changing) (Szekeres, 2004, p. 12)
  - Administrative units which focus on audit & quality assurance
    - Again, using up resources that could better be used by academic departments
  - Audit gives administrators more power

Themes from the Text

- Confusion of terms
  - “Administration”: senior management
  - Mainly made up of academic rather than administrative staff (e.g., dean)
  - Management & leadership
- Differing working conditions
  - “Administrative staff have different working conditions to academic staff [...] (more pay, better parking spots, lower workloads, etc.)” (Szekeres, 2004, p. 15)
  - Academic administrators vs. professional administrators
  - Statistics do not establish “whether the working conditions for administrative staff have improved relative to academic staff” (Szekeres, 2004, p. 16)

Themes from the Text

- Menial/women's work
  - *Women's work* (booking rooms, typing notices, etc.)
  - "Administrative roles are, on the whole, more complex, more specialized, more skilled and more responsive to the external environment" today than in the 1970s (Szekeres, 2004, p. 17)
- Taking over/too powerful
  - There is a perception "that there has been substantial growth in numbers of administrative staff relative to academic staff" (Szekeres, 2004, p. 18)
    - Not reflected in statistics
  - However, the number of senior administrators has gone up
    - Visibility
  - Overt/position power vs. tacit power
    - Low-level females, secretarial positions, knowledge

Younger academics’ constructions of “authenticity”, “success” and professional identity
(Louise Archer, 2008)

Overview of Text

- Question/Topic
  - How are younger academics' identities formed in the context of work

- Subjects
  - Sample of eight younger academics between the ages of 30-35
  - Subjects are based out of universities within the UK
  - Subjects come from a range of backgrounds (gender, racial, subject area, etc.)

- Data Collection
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - Snowball sample

Key Ideas & Terminologies

- “Feeling Academic”
  - “Being” Academic:
    - Embodying the qualities and practices of being knowledgeable, intellectual, critical, etc. (Archer, 2008, p. 397).
  - “Doing” Academia:
    - Performing research related activities (e.g. writing grant proposals, publishing), which helps with constructing academic identity (Archer, 2008, p. 398).
  - “Having” Academia:
    - Possessing the appropriate knowledge, publications, credentials and reputation, etc. (Archer, 2008, p. 397).

Key Ideas & Terminologies (*continued*)

- "New times":
  - New Public Managerialism
    - "New public managerialism has sought 'to produce in individuals higher levels of flexibility, productivity and co-operation with national economic objectives for the economic benefit of the nation" (Archer, 2008, p. 286
  - Audit Explosion
    - The constant surveillance and assessment of performance
- Authenticity / Legitimacy:
  - How one can candidly and uniquely be themselves in the context of their identity, personality, research and interests, physical appearance, etc.
- Self-governance:
  - "A governmentality of the soul," (Archer, 2008, p. 389). How one actively manages and controls themselves
- "Unbecoming":
  - "Involves conflicts and instances of inauthenticity, marginalization, and exclusion" (Archer, 2008, p. 387).

Themes & Key Findings from the Text

- Overall Findings:
  - The sample of academics experienced inauthenticity due to various factors, including:
    - Age
    - Race
    - Class
    - Gender
  - These various structural locations constrained subjects abilities to perform “success” and “be academic”
- Conflictive Nature of Academia
  - “Process of bidding” , or pressure for academics to bring in money for universities
    - Academics are expected produce publications and external revenue for research
  - Motives to achieve certain markers of success and reperform, rather than preserve authenticity

Themes & Key Findings from the Text (*Continued*)

- Examples
  - Age
    - “Some of the more established staff, how they talk to peers is definitely different from the way they talk to you”
    - Lack of respect and seriousness with younger academics
    - Success isn’t emulated with “younger looks”
    - Age oftentimes intersects with other social locations (e.g. appear as a young woman)
  - Race / Gender
    - Code-switching or using workforce and academic lingo
    - Subconscious bias
    - Embedded racism/gender inequalities (e.g. lack of representation)

Further Inquiry

- Question to further consider:
  - How can universities and subject departments incentivize and support academics in being authentic in their pursuits, interests, and identities
  - How can universities and administrators reduce the ambiguity of the academic profession
    - Additionally how can they reduce the burdens of academics

Universities: Past, Present, & Future Webinar

Glen Jacobs (Professor of Higher Education, University of Toronto)

How is academic work and the academic profession changing given:

The repositioning of universities as key institutions within knowledge societies/economies

Increasing participation/access: expansion, massification and the emergence of high participation systems

Increasing global/national competition: prestige, funding,

Shifts in system structures, governance, accountability

Increasing Comparative Scholarship on the Academic Profession BUT ALSO Conceptual Challenges

Martin Finkelstein and I began to ask:

How can we take fundamental national differences in higher education systems, academic work and the structure of academic careers/pathways into account in comparative scholarship?

Glen Jacobs (Professor of Higher Education, University of Toronto)

Academic Career Pathways in the Context of National Higher Education Systems

Germany (Barbara Kehm)
France (Christine Musselin)
United Kingdom (Peter Scott)
Russia (Maria Yudkevich)
Brazil (Elizabeth Balbachevsky)
India (N. Jaram)
China (Fengqiao Yan and Dan Mao)
Japan (Akiyoshi Yonezawa)
United States (Martin Finkelstein)
Canada (Glen A. Jones)

Academic pathways vary dramatically

- When does the academic career begin? (doctoral candidate, Assistant professor, unstructured?)
- University employee, civil servant?
- Defined career pathway (or unstructured)?
- Career ladder (internal versus external labour markets, standards versus competition, mobility)
- Job security?

Understanding these differences is important!

Glen Jacobs (Professor of Higher Education, University of Toronto)

Some key variables/factors:

1. Centrality of research to academic work

2. Vertical stratification of institutions (where academics work is increasingly important: resources, prestige, opportunities)

3. Vertical and horizontal fragmentation of academic work (specialization, growth in precarious employment, multiple academic pathways).

So – in the comparative analysis of the academic profession we need to consider:

Important differences between higher education systems – the context of academic work

Important differences in academic career pathways (which frequently frame, influence, or broadly define academic careers)

Professor Marek Kwiek (UNESCO Chair in Institutional Research and Higher Education, University of Poznan, Poland)

2. Context: Research as a Major Stratifying Force in Academic Science and Institutions

- **In the past two decades, the academic profession has become more internally divided than ever before**, perhaps most visibly in the United States (Cummings & Finkelstein, 2012; Johnston, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2012).
- The **various segments of the academic profession** have been **drifting apart (salaries; tenure; full-time)**.
- A general contrast emerges between **the haves and have-nots** in terms of **working conditions** and the **attractiveness** of the academic profession in the future.
- Many social, economic, and political factors influencing these changes (Altbach et al., 2010), but the **increasing role of research in knowledge economies is among them.**
- The role of research is **powerfully divisive.** And research performance and outputs are more **easily measurable and internationally comparable** than other university missions.
- **Research differentiates the academic profession into segments, with various roles**.
- In the postwar period, we became **accustomed to the idea that the academic profession was relatively homogeneous**. Our HE systems were **more similar than dissimilar** to each other. Not any more.
- Academic profession studies confront these issues **directly, with data**!

Professor Marek Kwiek (UNESCO Chair in Institutional Research and Higher Education, University of Poznan, Poland)

3. Dimensions of Research Explored

- I have studied **several dimensions related to research** and **social stratification in science**.
- Specifically (all across 11 European systems):
  - **High research productivity;**
  - **International research collaboration;** and
  - **High academic income.**
  - **My major variables from the survey were**: publication numbers (by type); international collaboration in research (yes/no); research/teaching orientation; working time distribution (teaching, working, other); and income from your university. CAP was a treasure for social scientists!
- I explored **the contrasting ideal types of academics**:
  - **Top research performers** (vs. the rest)
  - **Internationalists** (vs. locals) in research
  - **Academic top earners** (vs. the rest)
- I studied who they were; how they worked; and what they were thinking (academic attitudes and beliefs).
- The methodological label I used was simple: **survey-based, international, comparative academic profession studies.**
- I also used 500 interview reports to study major milestones in academic research, and 30 in-depth Polish interviews (plus 150 other transcribed Polish interviews) – **without much success**.

Professor Marek Kwiek (UNESCO Chair in Institutional Research and Higher Education, University of Poznan, Poland)

4. Major Findings Related to Research

- **The major patterns found across 11 European systems** were very **interesting**, with policy implications:

  (1) **The 10/50 productivity rule**: the upper 10% of scholars (top research performers) in almost every system produce 50% of all publications. High skweness in productivity in every country studied.

  (2) **Highly productive scientists work longer weekly hours, longer research-hours and are more research-oriented**. Teaching orientation as a predictor practically excludes academics from the class of top performers.

  (3) **Internationalists (in research) are more research-oriented and more productive**. Locals are more teaching-oriented and less productive.

  (4) **High research productivity is strongly correlated with higher academic income**. Top performers are over-represented among top earners. They just make more money!
- "**Social stratification in science**" is more **related to research** (and attitudes to it) than to anything else, including demographics, age, gender, institutional type, academic position etc!
- **Research** emerges as **the most divisive dimension** in academic profession studies today.
- Research divides academics into classes, and institutions into tiers.
- However, **tackling research at at the micro-level of individuals** requires **new methods and data sources**, accompanying surveys (esp. requires productivity and collaboration metadata over time). **Complementarity** between interviews, surveys and Big Data analyses is the concept!
- **Thank you so much!**

Discussion Posts

Timary

- “The Invisible Workers” was written in 2004. Timary wonders how university administrators’ roles have changed since then, and if they have become even more corporate-like. She hypothesizes that post-2008, administrators’ roles have become more financially-focused than they are student/faculty-focused.
- Timary also points out that “The Invisible Workers” chooses to “[look] only at white-collar workers,” excluding a large portion of people who are even more invisible than administrators, like campus custodians (Szekeres, 2004, p. 8).

Ashley

- The graduate student strike
  - Ashley mentions that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) does recognize graduate students as employees; however, the NLRB took a different stance during the Trump presidency, meaning graduate students remain in a legally fluctuating space.
  - “Many institutions continue to argue that student workers are students, not employees entitled to collective bargaining rights” (Flaherty, 2021).

Jeffrey

- Younger staff members are likely to be more approachable and offer experiences similar to those of current undergraduates, making them appealing mentors for students. It is also unfair.
- Jeffrey wonders if the stress-inducing demands of an academic career scare off prospective faculty members who would want to make meaningful contributions to knowledge.

Sienna

- “Joanne defined ‘real’ success in personal, intrinsic terms -- as achieving a good ‘work-life balance’ and ‘being happy’ in her personal life’” (Archer, 2008, p. 400).
    - This provoked Sienna to think about recent conversations with her friends and our discussion with Dean Rakesh Khurana about happiness (students who come to Harvard act as if they have to prove themselves all over again).

Vera

- Vera points out that we often talk about how imposter syndrome affects undergraduate students, but we rarely discuss imposter syndrome in young academics.
- “Thus being (and appearing) ‘young’ (and female) constituted a barrier that many younger academic women felt...” (Archer, 2008, p. 393)
    - Vera says that expectations around dress, make-up, and hair set women back even in high school.

Felix

- Felix considers how he interacts with administrative workers on a regular basis:
    - Resolving rooming logistics with House administrators
    - Picking up packages from the mailroom
    - Tapping into the professional advising network
    - Calling up IT for trouble with Wi-Fi connectivity
- Felix does not completely agree with the idea that the role of administrative staff is entirely efficiency-driven.
    - Felix has seen House Deans & Tutors consistently go the extra mile to to put on over-the-top Open Houses and Study Breaks.

Kathryn

- Observations:
  - Marketization leads to the commodification of education and education being managed by market motives rather than pedagogical guidance
- Questions:
  - Where a student is basically a “consumer”, how do we measure/value the “product” being sold?

Lourdes

- Observations:
  - Tenure process includes feedback for candidates
  - Barrier to entry for younger and underrepresented academics with tenureship
- Questions:
  - What impact are student movements and awareness for tenure-denied faculty having on administrative decisions?

Emily

- Observations:
  - Academia and graduate programs being highly competitive in nature, and the many aspects individuals should consider before going into a graduate program
  - The role of social location (race, gender, socioeconomic status) in creating hurdles within academia

Marcos

- Observations:
  - The various emotions and ambiguity surrounding the tenure process
  - The contradictions that arise with the tenure process, such as candidates seeking the same/similar tenured positions evaluating each other
- Questions:
  - How persuaded are scholars from not going into these positions and do they really have other options?

Claudia

- Observations:
  - Hiring patterns reversed the positive trend of increasing Black, Hispanic and Asian American scholars during the great recession, and the possible parallels with the Covid-19 Pandemic
  - Diverse candidate pool is not enough if the hiring process and tenure track process is flawed

Lauren

- Observations:
  - Professor Roland Fryer's status as a "rising star" despite the allegations and investigations he was facing
- Questions:
  - How do you hold a professor accountable for their behavior without undermining their successes and contributions?
  - How important are Title IX allegations to the University and does that importance change based on who the parties involved?

Emma

- Observations:
  - The unsettling testimonies and experiences of individuals on the tenure track
  - The role candidates play between pedagogy, research, student support, etc.
  - Theme of opacity: information is never straightforward and centralized, creating barriers

Works Cited

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