

# The Winds of Change and the Conditions of Academic Staff in Europe

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Higher education systems and academics in Europe are in the midst of an interesting time of change. These changes are occurring primarily in administrative staffing and in the employment and working conditions of academics. An international study conducted by the author seeks to understand these developments among the member states of the European Union. The rise of accountability to the state and the growth of managerialism in the universities are two recent developments across European higher education. While the speed and depth of these changes might differ, all higher education systems in this study have experienced or are currently experiencing similar trends. Watchwords in this context are performance and quality, competition and flexibility, and efficiency and accountability.

### *Current Trends in European Higher Education*

*Diversification* is a reaction to the former philosophy of legally instituted homogeneity in higher education. *Decentralization* is moving higher education toward a system of distant steering by government that allows each institution a higher degree of autonomy. *Marketization* is an effort to build up a market-like resource allocation system and develop competition between and within higher education institutions. Paradoxically, control over higher education institutions is effectively shifting away from academic oligarchy toward greater market and state control. Among the obvious signs of market and market-like behavior that are having a growing impact on academic staff are competitiveness, a strong emphasis on productivity, the search for ever-expanding and new income streams, and drastic cost cutting. It would be misleading, however, to see the rise of academic capitalism as an undisputed global trend that is taking over higher education and destroying traditional rules and regulations. In the continental European context, many of the affiliations between academic staff and the state have remained, as well as the traditional resource distribution that maintains the tenure and governance systems. The government remains the most important actor. In some countries where social welfare, trade unionism, and collective bargaining have had a strong tradition, the marketization of higher education is counterbalanced by new corporatist approaches.

In several countries there are signs of a growing decentralization of the employment and working conditions of academics. Responsibility and decision making have shifted toward the academic workplace, in ways that vary by country. Examples include a shift of responsibility from the central government to intermediate bodies, to the local level of employer regulations and local collective bargaining, and to individual bargaining between academics and institutional representatives. Salaries, teaching loads, and other elements of time and resource allocation are becoming more flexible and are being reorganized according to institutional and individual circumstances. These developments are contributing to a growing loss of community within the academic profession.

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While the institutional level is gaining in importance in staffing issues, it would be misleading to speak of a uniform new trend in public management. In some countries public debate tends to draw a caricature of the *homo academicus* as the “lazy professor” who needs incentives and visible sanctions. Academics are seen as spoiled and narcissistic employees who must be cut down to size or as a guild-like anachronistic workforce that must adapt to the realities of corporate capitalism in higher education. In other countries, the academic tends to be seen as a *homo economicus* who can be steered by cost-centered management, which shapes the local rules, regulations, and instruments to ensure efficient work and output. The underlying assumption is that people go where the money is and that steering by the invisible hand of the market will lead to the expected outcomes.

A more sophisticated approach views institutional leadership as “soft” supervisors who design academics’ status and tasks according to their strengths and weaknesses. This is similar to the approach of staff development through human resource management.

### *Strategies for Reorganization*

The conditions of academic life have become a moving target as strategic attempts are made to reorganize the employment conditions of an increasingly diverse academic profession. The most prominent issues involve new posi-

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tions and career tracks for junior staff, job security and tenure, part-time and fixed-term academic staff, academic pay scales, flexible and performance-related income streams, declining academic salaries, human resource development and academic training, teaching standards, and work and teaching loads.

Many measures have been taken to preserve or enhance the quality of teaching and learning and of research and service under conditions of tighter financial control and to reverse rising student-staff ratios. They include restructuring the higher education system to set different quality objectives and distributing resources for various sectors, institutions, or subunits in higher education; improving the training of academic staff by reorganizing junior academic careers and career criteria; enhancing the assessment and evaluation of academic staff performance and linking them to rewards and sanctions; and redesigning the management of higher education institutions and increasing the ability to steer academic staff. Thus even in higher education we can identify methods used by other kinds of manufacturing or service companies to improve quantity or quality of output without additional resources or staff.

The obvious and serious danger of this approach is that it could threaten the core elements of the academic profession—that is, collegial decision making, autonomy in teaching and research, intellectual leadership and social prestige, and the certainty of economic and intrinsic rewards. There is some evidence that might bear out the theory of the deprofessionalization of academics: salaries are being broken into different components and seem to be on the decline; academic tenure has become an issue in many countries; teaching and research are monitored and inspected; and a casual workforce of part-time and fixed-term staff is growing at the periphery of the professional core. Last, but not least, in some continental European countries we see a change in the status of academics from that of civil servant to a more contractual relationship. This thesis, however, tends to take as reality the new rhetoric of

output-based orientation, consumerism, market-driven flexibility, and managerialism. It tends to overestimate the impact of external actors and conditions on the life of higher education while underestimating dissimilar elements in specific national contexts, as well as the adaptability, inertia, resistance, and variety of responses of academics.

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The aforementioned study is finding that, despite claims of a general erosion in academic employment and working conditions, evidence of such a trend is not as strong, consistent, or universal as previously believed.

#### *In Search of a New Academic Professionalism*

Having said this, one cannot overlook the fact that the academic profession now finds itself in a rather defensive position. For a long time, academics successfully accommodated changing environments to their aims and needs. Now, however, they are increasingly blamed for higher education's shortcomings and problems in defining a new place in the emerging knowledge society. It is therefore important that academics find a third way beyond erosion and traditionalism and seek strategies of active involvement in the ongoing process of change. So far, the traditional character of the academic profession has not been affected by the advocacy of a new model. It has, rather, been left to the ongoing process of change to create a new professionalism of the academic profession and various subprofessions. ■

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## Overreliance on Part-Time Faculty: An American Trend

### **Ernst Benjamin**

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The proportion of faculty who teach part time on American campuses has nearly doubled in the last 30 years. In 1970, only 22 percent of faculty held part-time appointments; today, at least 42 percent teach part time—more than twice the proportion of part-time workers in the overall U.S. labor force. This shift is one of the most controversial trends in American higher education.

Proponents of hiring part-time faculty assert that most are happy with their jobs and that institutions are better able to reduce costs and adjust to enrollment variations. Moreover, many part-time faculty are able instructors who focus more on teaching students than on conducting research. Critics say part-time faculty are underpaid and lack the medical insurance essential in the American system of health care. They note with concern that women, who hold just over one-third of full-time appointments, hold nearly half of part-time appointments. They argue that many part-time faculty are inadequately qualified, less productive, superficially evaluated, carelessly hired, and too easily reappointed. Finally, as part-time faculty displace full-