

The Deteriorating Guru: The Crisis of the Professoriate

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Universities worldwide are becoming marketized, privatized, differentiated, and otherwise changed to meet the demands of an academic environment that stresses accountability and mass access. Higher education is increasingly seen as a “private good”—a commodity that should be subject to the logic of the market. These changes have had a profoundly negative impact on the academic profession—the heart of any academic enterprise. Working conditions and career paths for the academic profession are deteriorating. Universities often cannot attract the “best and brightest” and may even have problems luring the “reasonably intelligent and above average.”

The real crisis will be how to maintain an academic environment that will attract able scholars and scientists to the universities and at the same time recognize the challenges of mass higher education and the financial realities of the 21st century. At present, academic systems are without thinking damaging the core of the university by ignoring the needs of the professoriate. Those responsible for decision making, (e.g., senior administrators, boards of trustees, and government officials) are ignoring the academic profession as they grapple with the increasingly difficult problems facing higher education. It should be recognized that without a strong, committed academic profession, higher education cannot provide effective teaching or top-quality research. In knowledge-based economies, universities must have academic staff who are well qualified, well trained, and committed to academic work.

Traditional Realities

Not long ago, in the more successful academic systems, academics could plan on a career that was reasonably secure and offered the satisfactions of teaching and some research. Many saw university teaching as a “calling” and were attracted to the life of the mind. In the United States, most were appointed to tenure-track positions that led to secure jobs once the rigorous review process for promotion to tenure was completed. In much of Europe, academics had appointments to the civil service and the job security and status that came along with that status. Salaries were not high and did not match the incomes of other professionals with similar qualifications, but they permitted a middle-class lifestyle. There was little serious evaluation of academic performance, but a

general conviction existed that almost all academics were doing a decent job. Academics enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as well as fairly secure academic freedom. The few research “stars” were rewarded mainly with high status rather than large salaries, and most were teachers who did little research. Even in many developing countries—such as India, China, Nigeria, and others—academe was an honorable profession that, even if ill paid, provided high social status and job security.

Some would argue that it is high time for professors to be forced to compete and be subjected to the same pressures as in other occupations. Accountability and evaluation will, it is argued, get rid of unproductive “deadwood.” It is not so simple as that. The traditional culture of academe worked reasonably well, even in the context of mass higher education. Academics had a degree of autonomy, and the academic community decided on such matters as curriculum, the organization of studies, and the like. In a few places, such as Italy, the structural problems of the academic system and the conservatism of the professoriate created problems. But generally, the academic system provided acceptable quality of teaching and produced research. The conditions of academic work, even without high salaries, were generally acceptable. The academic profession attracted bright scholars who appreciated the special circumstances of university life. The combination of intellectual freedom, autonomy, and a relative lack of day-to-day accountability created an environment in which creative work could be accomplished.

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New Circumstances

Much has changed almost everywhere in the past several decades. Universities have responded to societal pressures by changing the nature of academic work dramatically. Academic salaries have not kept up either with inflation or with remuneration in other professional fields. In many countries, there is no longer the expectation of a secure career. In the United States, fewer than half of new academic appointments are tenure track and full-time. Many are part time while others are a new category of full-time term positions. A decline in the number of full-time jobs means greater competition, and this has led to some unemployment of new Ph.D. graduates. Many of the most able Ph.D.s are taking jobs in other fields, including government and business where salaries are better and there is better chance for a secure fu-

ture. A growing divide exists between the minority of tenured faculty and the rest, creating a kind of two-tier academic profession.

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In other countries, the situation is similarly grim. The traditional employment security of the academic profession is being weakened by moving academics from the civil service. In Britain, tenure was abolished as part of a major university reform aimed at making the entire academic system more competitive. In Germany, most new academic appointments do not permit promotion, forcing many academics to compete for new positions at other universities. In Central Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, the traditional academic profession has been greatly weakened by changes in working conditions, deteriorating salaries, and loss of status. It is common in developing countries for academic salaries to be so poor that even full-time professors must hold more than one job. In Latin America, traditional reliance on part-time teachers has prevented the emergence of an effective professoriate.

Everywhere, increased accountability has subjected academics to bureaucratic controls and has weakened academic autonomy. As universities have become more oriented to student interests and market demands, traditional academic values have been undermined. The rise of the private sector in higher education—the fastest growing segment worldwide—has meant further deterioration of the profession because private institutions seldom provide full-time positions nor do they provide much security of tenure. A profession that thrived on autonomy and a certain detachment from direct competition is now exposed to the vicissitudes of the market.

Consequences

The future of the academic profession is uncertain, which is a problem for the success of the academic enterprise generally. What will attract bright young people to study for the doctorate when the careers—and salaries—available are marginal at best? Will academic work continue to be organized in a way that supports and rewards basic research? How will the traditional links between teaching and research be maintained so that those responsible mainly for teaching will keep abreast of current developments in their fields? Universities depend

on a full-time professoriate—not only to teach but also to participate in governance and curriculum development. New patterns of managerial control vitiate traditional patterns of collegial governance and further weaken both the morale and the commitment of the academic profession. Academic morale is deteriorating in many countries, and many have noted declines in both the abilities and the numbers of those pursuing doctoral study with the aim of joining the professoriate.

The Future

Without an able and committed professoriate, universities will fail in their major mission—to provide high-quality teaching and engage in research. Without a doubt, there must be adjustments in academic work and in the organization of universities to meet the needs of mass higher education and of the knowledge economies. Further differentiation in professorial roles, more extensive measurement of academic performance, and greater flexibility in appointments are probably necessary. If the academic profession continues to decline, higher education may continue to produce graduates, but the intellectual quality of those graduates and their ability to participate in society will be placed in question. Just as important, the basic research that universities have produced will be less innovative and valuable. The future of the university lies in the hands of the professoriate. ■

The Opportunity Cost of the Pursuit of International Quality Standards

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During the last several years, spurred in part by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the current round of negotiations of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), efforts to establish a single set of international standards for higher education quality have picked up considerably. WTO/GATS sets the stage for attention to international standards by (1) including higher education as a “service” to be regulated for purposes of trade and (2) calling for “liberalizing” (expanding) trade in higher education by removing restrictions to market access and barriers to competition.

GATS does not specifically call for international quality standards for higher education as part of a trade