
US: The centrality of the academic profession

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In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected president of the United States in considerable part by emphasising the importance of the economy. His mantra - "It's the economy, stupid!" - focused this point. For higher education, the mantra should be "It's the faculty, stupid!". In fact, no university can achieve success without a well-qualified, committed academic profession.

Neither an impressive campus nor an innovative curriculum will produce good results without great professors.

(This is the opening to a paper published in the upcoming *International Higher Education*. The paper continues as follows:)

Higher education worldwide focuses on the 'hardware' - buildings, laboratories and the like - at the expense of 'software' - the people who make any academic institution successful. Look at the oft-criticised rankings. What do they measure? Numbers of Nobel prize-winners, the research productivity of professors, grants obtained by faculty, and the quality of the students are central. Budgets and facilities are less important in the rankings.

Almost everywhere, the faculty is forgotten in the rush to cope with ever-increasing enrolments and in the midst of deepening financial problems. If higher education is to succeed, "It's the faculty, stupid!" must be a central rallying cry for universities worldwide.

It is depressing, but quite essential, to examine the status of the academic profession worldwide. A few examples will illustrate global realities.

One issue involves the fact that the academic profession is ageing in many countries. In much of the world, half or more of the professoriate is getting close to retirement. In many countries, too few new PhDs are being produced to replace those leaving the profession, and many new doctorates prefer to work outside of academe. Too few incentives for advanced doctoral study and an uncertain employment market for new PhDs, along with inadequate financial support in many fields, deter enrolment and ensure that many students drop out of doctoral programmes. Countries with rapidly growing higher education systems are especially hard hit. Vietnam, for example, requires 12,000 more academics each year to meet expansion goals, and only 10% of the academic profession currently hold doctoral degrees.

Global examples of the current state of the academic profession will illustrate contemporary deteriorating. These examples are chosen to highlight widespread realities.

The rise of the part-time profession

To be most effective, professors need to be truly engaged in teaching and research. They must have full-time academic appointments and devote attention exclusively to academic responsibilities and to the universities and colleges that employ them. The full-time professoriate is a dying breed.

Latin America is the homeland of the part-time 'taxicab' professor, rushing between teaching jobs or between class and another profession. Except for Brazil, in almost all Latin American countries up to 80% of the professoriate is employed part-time. Paid a pittance, they have little commitment to the university or to students. It is not surprising that there are almost no Latin American universities among the top 500 and little research productivity.

In the United States, only half of newly hired academics are full-time on the 'tenure track' - scholars who can hope for a career in higher education. The rest are part-time 'contingent' faculty who are paid poorly for each course and have few benefits. A new class of full-time contract teachers has grown in recent years as a way for universities to ensure flexibility in staffing. Traditional tenure-track academic appointments tend to be most common in the upper-tier colleges and universities, thus increasing inequalities in the academic system as a whole.

In many countries, universities now employ part-time professors who have full-time appointments at other institutions. Many Eastern European countries, China, Vietnam, Uganda and others are examples of such a higher education sector. Academic salaries are sufficiently low, and the universities can expect that faculty will earn extra funds to supplement their own incomes and in some cases to subsidise the university's own budget.

At some Chinese universities, professors are expected to practice consulting and other outside work as part of their academic duties. In other cases, universities set up additional degree-granting colleges and ask the faculty to perform extra teaching at those schools, enhancing university revenues and individual salaries at the same time. It is also the case that professors at state universities in much of the world help to staff the burgeoning private higher education sector by 'moonlighting'.

The decline of a real full-time professoriate is undermining high quality higher education. If professors cannot devote their full attention not only to teaching and research but also to maintaining an academic

culture, working with students outside of the classroom, and participating in the governance of their universities, academic quality will decline. As the British say, 'penny wise and pound foolish'.

The dumbing down of the professoriate

It is possible that up to half of the world's university teachers have only earned a bachelor degree. No-one knows for sure. What we do know is that the academic profession is growing rapidly, and facilities for advanced degree study are not keeping up - nor are salary levels that encourage the 'best and brightest' to join the professoriate.

In China, the world's largest academic system, only 9% of the academic profession has doctorates (although 70% do in the top research universities). In India, 35% of academics have doctoral qualifications. In many countries, significant parts of the profession have a bachelor degree, and some have not even attained that basic degree. In most developing countries, only academic staff at the most prestigious universities hold a doctoral degree - usually under 10% of the total.

The expansion of graduate post-baccalaureate programmes has been identified as a top priority worldwide, but expansion has been slow because the demand for basic access is so great.

The 'pauperisation' of the profession

It is no longer possible to lure the best minds to academe. A significant part of the problem is financial. Academic salaries have not kept up with remuneration for highly trained professionals everywhere. A recent study of academic salaries in 15 countries shows full-time academic staff can survive on their salaries. However, they do not earn much more than the average salary in their country. Relatively few of the most qualified young people undergo the rigorous education required for jobs in the top universities. However, highly trained individuals frequently flee to higher paying jobs in other professions or, in the case of developing countries, leave for academic or other jobs in Europe or North America.

The bureaucratisation of the professoriate

In years past, even if academics were not well paid, they held a good deal of autonomy and control over their teaching and research as well as their time. This situation has changed in many academic systems and institutions. In terms of accountability and assessment, the professoriate has lost much of its autonomy. Assessment exercises and other accountability measures require a lot of time and effort to complete. The pressure to assess academic productivity of all kinds is substantial, even if much of that work is in fact quite difficult or impossible to accurately measure. Much criticism has been aimed at the British Research Assessment Exercises, which many claim has distorted academic work.

Universities have also become much more bureaucratic as they have grown and have become more accountable to external authorities. Heavy bureaucratic control is deleterious to a sense of academic community and generally to the faculty's traditional involvement in academic governance. The power of the professors, once dominant and sometimes used by them to resist change, has declined in the age of accountability and bureaucracy.

What is to be done?

It is not difficult to identify the path to a restored academic profession - and thus successful higher education systems. The academic profession must again become a profession - with appropriate training, compensation and status. This means that academic programmes to provide masters and doctoral degrees must be significantly expanded. The rush towards part-time teachers must be ended and, instead, a sufficient cadre of full-time professors with appropriate career ladders appointed. Salaries must be sufficient to attract talented young scholars and to keep them in the profession.

In a differentiated academic system, not all professors will focus on research - typically the gold standard in terms of prestige and status. Most academics mainly teach, and their workloads should reflect this. It would also be impossible to return to the days of unfettered autonomy and little if any evaluation of academic work. Yet, accountability and assessment can be done in ways that are appropriate to academic work rather than punitive exercises.

If there is any good news in this story, it is that more professors enjoy what they are doing and feel a loyalty to the profession. The 1992 international Carnegie study of the academic profession found surprisingly high levels of satisfaction, and the 2007 Changing Academic Profession global survey found much the same result. Despite their problems, academic life has significant attractions. The challenge is to ensure that the academic profession is again seen by policymakers and the public as central to the success of higher education.

In the current environment, the popular press as well as some university administrators and many government officials are happy to criticise professors as the root of academe's problems. In fact, the opposite is the case - the professors are the root of the unprecedented success of higher education. There is always room for improvement, but professor-bashing will lead to neither reform nor greater productivity.

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