

The binding and unbinding of academic careers

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Introduction

Like all working people academics go through a sequence of jobs, work roles and experiences, that is to say, they go through a career. While academic careers have not been studied extensively in the past [1] it has recently been argued [2] that the study of them has a special value for career research in general. In particular, it has been argued that academic careers traditionally possess certain features that make them markedly different compared with conventional hierarchical, bureaucratic models that prevail in other organizations. Since the early work of Caplow and McGee, studies on academic careers have indeed emphasized special features that make investigations into this field interesting for discussions about new forms of careers in other organizations [3,4], such as the protean (a career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be re-invented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change), the post-corporate or the boundaryless career [2,5]. Various change drivers have led career researchers to reconsider organizational career structures and practices: first, organizational membership and organizational boundaries matter less for professional careers; and, secondly, professional careers have become more diverse and less standardized alongside the traditional model of ‘one career’ [4,6]. We will argue that synergy between academic careers and the ‘new careers’ literature is evidently strong, while there is also reason for caution. Traditional academic career systems also have features that reflect characteristics of bureaucratic, hierarchical career models, such as ‘tenure’ and a fairly rigid career hierarchy [5,7,8].

Thus it is useful to locate academic careers in the context of both traditional and new career literature. This argument is supported by recent changes in academic careers. On the one hand there is empirical evidence to suggest that academic careers are becoming increasingly boundaryless due to the growing international mobility of faculty members, the blurring boundaries between universities and other knowledge organizations, and the greater reliance on part-time and adjunct staff, or experiments with alternative contracts [9,10]. On the other hand, universities policies and practices are moving from collegial or professional governance models to management models. Managerial practices align academics activities more closely with the interests and needs of their organization, and strengthen the role of universities’ internal labour markets for academic careers [11–13]. Such trends may also mean that academic careers become more bound to their organization [14].

In this chapter, we discuss these issues in two steps. In the first part, traditional features of academic careers are briefly presented and discussed.

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They indicate a mixture of 'old' (bureaucratic, hierarchical) and 'new' (boundaryless, protean) career characteristics. In the second part, recent developments in academia are discussed regarding their possible impact on academic careers, both in the direction of 'old' and 'new' careers.

Traditional career models: the exceptionalism of academic careers

Career researchers tend to be struck by the traditional features of academic careers that resemble models emphasized in the new career literature, such as, free agency due to academic freedom, knowledge- and peer-review based decisions in the labour market, external recruitment that is also utilized for non-entry level positions, the self-management of careers, the role of networks and mentoring, and the use of alternative work arrangements [2]. We have argued that such features can, at least partly, be understood by addressing the cognitive and social particularity of science, and the traditional arrangements for the activity around which science is centred, which is, of course, research [15]. Such traditional arrangements for academic careers have left their imprint on the organization of academic labour markets and promotion systems, positional hierarchies and work arrangements.

Labour markets

Labour markets in academia are, to a considerable extent, organized as external professional labour markets on the basis of individual reputation. An important factor in the study of academics careers within an organizational perspective, is the specialities that provide important signals for employers. Vacant positions tend to be offered for a specific specialization [16], which is dependent on what that scientist's colleagues are doing all over the world [17,18]. In addition, universities have traditionally developed relatively flat, firm, internal labour markets [17,19,20]. Academic organizations invest little towards in-house training for their own internal labour market and often recruit externally in the case of non-entry positions [17]. High mobility and fluctuation are seen as an innovative feature and not as an inefficient one.

Promotion systems

Unlike organizations with strong internal labour markets and related policies for internal promotion, academia recruits on all levels from outside the organization. The traditional system of promotion within the organization was never a feature that characterized academia. Promotions systems are based on academic performance and reputation rather than age or seniority within the organization. Criteria for promotion are connected to the academics' performance, by way of his or her publications, conference proceedings, acquired research funds and teaching evaluations. Usually, the organizational context defines the availability of positions and decision-making processes, while allocation decisions are handed over to the specialities. Academics have themselves become the main authority in the job allocation process.

Academic reputation as a key for progression

The prime criterion for success in academia was, and still is, performance in research, which is judged by academic reputation. In conventional professions, most professionals aim for local success, whilst success in academia is based on boundaryless criteria and processes within the disciplinary communities. Reputation is considered foremost in academic career progression, as competition is organized around both formal and informal evaluations of productivity relative to one's peers. Reputation and prestige are indirect indicators of academic performance, which form the basis for academics' social stratification within a given speciality [18,21].

Positional hierarchies

The academic career model was, and still is, based on a relatively flat structure, with very few hierarchical levels. At the same time, academic labour markets also tend to create a specific mix of open and closed positions [22]. Non-tenured positions have traditionally been offered to junior academics as a stock of relatively open positions. These positions create an extended probationary period for the observation of aspiring academics by their senior peers. In contrast, tenured positions represent quite closed positions from the point of view of the employer. The traditional meaning of tenure in academia lies in autonomous work conditions coupled with poor opportunities for employers to monitor productivity — resulting in an unusually high degree of job security. This means that academic careers were (and to some extent still are) also characterized by stability and long-term employment relationships for senior staff, and a rigid structure of hierarchies between senior and junior staff.

Autonomy and 'free agency'

Academics act as 'free agents' [2] that can move with relative ease from one organization to another, as long as this fits within their research agenda and 'cognitive career'. Inter-organizational career mobility is built into the career ladder of many university systems, indicating that high-career mobility is perceived to be beneficial for both the individual and the organization. Job mobility between scientific fields and organizations is also regarded as cognitive mobility. Academics receive tacit knowledge from colleagues and in exchange transfer knowledge to them as well. These cognitive careers provide the grounds for scientific innovations [17].

Knowledge management

The intrinsic motivation of academics and their characteristic of being life-long learners has always been part of the academic culture. Traditionally, academic work is built on tacit knowledge rather than explicit knowledge, the learning pathways of academics are characterized by 'learning by doing', and knowledge was the individual capital of the academic, not of the organization. Knowledge management is thus undertaken by either an individual academic or a group of academics gathering around a common cognitive agenda.

Use of flexible work arrangements

Academia was one of the first sectors that allowed their staff to work wherever they were instead of expecting attendance during regular working hours. Time spent on teaching and research (and on specific tasks and projects within these areas) is usually quite limited in the extent of its recommendation. The allocation of 'time and space' in academic work is therefore the responsibility of the academics themselves, rather than due to organizational demands.

Low organizational commitment and collegial solidarity

Academia was considered a highly individualized workplace long before other organizations discovered the 'individualization' of their highly qualified labour force. In academia, the commitment of the individual to the organization is low, while their commitment to the discipline and a sense for individual accomplishment is considered the key to their professional identity. The academic career model thus builds on networking, not only within the organization, but also more importantly across organizations. This is summarized in [23], which called an academic a 'publicly paid private practitioner'.

The chosen examples (for a more extensive discussion, see [2]) highlight the differences between traditional features of academic careers and classical models of careers concerning internal labour markets [24–26]. Academic labour markets therefore share certain characteristics with professional labour markets. They are characterized by small performance units, professional autonomy, flat hierarchies and a high level of qualifications [19]. From this point of view, the traditional academic career role model possesses many attributes that resemble the new models of corporate careers.

Challenging the traditional academic career model

In many industrial societies after World War II, various phenomena contributed to a political climate that allowed for substantial increases in investment in higher education and research [27,28]. In those days, a consensus emerged amongst the faculties of modern universities about what it meant to be a professional in the higher academic strata, which stated that: research was supposed to form the more prominent focus of academic work, with knowledge being pursued for its own sake; the search for the latest frontiers of truth is best organized into academic-disciplinary units; reputation is established through national and international peer groups of scholars; and, quality is assured by peer review and academic freedom [9]. Past experience shows us that these defining notions of the academic career are not historically a 'given', and are likely to be contested in various ways [12].

Since the 1980s, we have observed a remarkable trend towards new models for universities as organizations, such as the corporate model of universities [29], the entrepreneurial model [30,31] or enterprise model [32], the service model [33] and the stakeholder model [34]. They suggest that the process of transforming the university into an organization comprises of policies and practices directed towards the marketization and management models, which were formerly unknown to the academic workplace. This shift manifests itself in many ways: through a tighter economic and more competitive environment; decreasing faculty power

with regards to decision-making in the organization, and the increasing power of administrators and managers; through growing expectations with regards to faculty involvement in outside activities; through academic entrepreneurship; and, through growing international competition for the 'bright minds'.

Such trends are interconnected and affect academic careers in multiple and partly ambiguous ways, resulting in them becoming, at the same time, both more boundaryless and more bound.

On one hand, academic careers are becoming more boundaryless due to a growing international market for faculty positions and competition for talents, the blurring boundaries between the traditional academic roles and quasi-entrepreneurial roles of academics, and the flexible nature of the academic labour market.

First, the search for relevance in society and the economy in teaching and research challenges traditional norms, with rewards given on the basis of principles of cognitive rationality and academic excellence. One of the demands that arose in the 1960s, and still persists today, was the technology transfer from universities to industries and other consumers of research results. Setting priorities to promote technologically promising scientific developments, attempts to forecast scientific breakthroughs with a strong application potential, and a general emphasis on 'relevance' and 'strategic research' are by now familiar phenomena [35,36]. Increasingly, academics face a situation where they are kindly invited to move from a bounded world of academia, to a project of academic career and work that exists in multiple worlds. Such blurring of boundaries encompasses a growing emphasis on the quasi-entrepreneurial role of academics [37,38]. Thus we might argue that recent developments in academia are widening the institutional context in which academic careers unfold.

Secondly, since the 1990s, academic employment contracts have started to change, reflecting the needs for greater organizational flexibility [11,13]. Non-professorial posts have changed due to expansion, as well as through the introduction of policies for the re-organization of resources and personnel. The rise of a class of non-professorial teachers, and additionally of externally financed contracted research staff are more or less an international phenomena. They tend to embed conflicting values and expectations directly into academia with regards to the functions of higher education and its staff [39]. Continuous employment and expectations towards a regular academic career have become more insecure for a growing number of staff. For example, in the USA, the majority of faculty members no longer occupy tenured positions. Full-time faculty positions that are not eligible for tenure and part-time faculty positions make-up more than half of all the academic staff. At the same time, the meaning of tenure has changed. In some countries, the strict traditional meaning of tenure (that permanent academic staff can only be dismissed in very exceptional cases) has come to an end. In these countries, tenured staff can now be dismissed, e.g. in case of redundancy due to their department or institute closing down.

Thirdly, there have always been certain international elements within academia. Nowadays, global trends play an increasingly important role for academic staff and a further push towards the internationalization of higher education is in the making [40,41]. International mobility of students and academic staff has grown, new technologies connect scholarly communities around the world in new ways, and English has become the new *lingua franca* of the international communities. New

regulations have been introduced concerning the comparability of degrees and their mutual recognition within, for example, the European Union, and the growth of virtual universities, off-campus providers and internationally active study programmes help to foster the internationalization of teaching and learning [42,43]. There is once again an international market for academics, that is, for members of the professoriate as well as for junior staff. Since the Middle Ages academia has probably never been so well characterized as an international endeavour.

Altogether, we might argue that academic careers are even more boundaryless than in the past. Expectations with regards to cross-sectoral co-operation and international competitiveness are certainly growing, while the contractual bonds between the university and its academic staff become less tight. On the other hand, there are signs that academic careers are becoming more bound. Measures are being undertaken to re-organize universities by aligning academics' activities more closely with the interests of their organization. We are observing the increasing role of managerial oversight and control, and a growing role of universities' internal labour markets for academic careers.

First, universities are increasingly expected to become responsible for their own input and process conditions [44,45]. Many governments withdraw from controlling and recommending organizational input and processes, focusing instead on monitoring organizational outcomes. Part and parcel of moving this process towards more organizational autonomy are the attempts to provide universities with enhanced ownership and control of their collective resources. Decisions concerning organizational membership can travel, for example, from the government to the universities. At present, many universities have the power to appoint the professoriate without interference from the central government, and the recruitment and appointment of other staff has been further devolved by the faculties.

Secondly, one of the most profound effects of the shift in universities' governance has been the increased importance of devices for internal control and university management [46]. This level in the higher education system was traditionally weak in continental Europe. Today, it is commonplace that institutional management has to be strengthened if universities are to be successful in a competitive world. Moreover, the drawing up of organization-wide strategic plans is making the more active role of the central management legitimate (as well as the de-central management of executive deans).

Thirdly, the construction of universities as more 'complete' organizations comprised of attempts to create a new rationality regarding their functioning, in terms of objectives, actions and evaluations [47]. Programmes for teaching and research that have pre-set objectives, as well as the efficient and effective means to achieve respective targets, have gained in popularity. Accounts and reports are written and presented to higher levels in the hierarchy, or to external stakeholders with a legitimate interest in the organization. This also provides a means for comparison and benchmarking with other organizations or between sub-units within a single organization. Accountability appears once objectives are set and assessments have been installed, and organizations or their members can be made responsible for the success or failure of these changes. In the event of a disappointing result, it is expected that this will present some consequences that will require future action.

All this has drawn attention from organizations to universities' most important and costly resources — their academic staff. Universities have a greater say in what their staff are doing, what performance criteria count, and which rules and incentives govern academic careers. Thus we may argue that academic careers get more bound to their organizational context and its changing rationality.

The impact on the traditional academic career model

The shifting boundaries of academia have an impact on the nature of work in academia and the specific characteristics of the academic career model [11–13,48].

Labour markets

Labour markets in academia are likely to be even more international now compared with the past. At present, as the 'baby boom' generation of faculty workers moves into retirement, we can see that important fields are suffering from a shortage of PhD students on their home turf. Thus the market for junior staff is increasingly characterized by international competition for the young talents. The internationalization of academia is also indicated by the increasing importance of articles in international journals as performance criteria. On the other hand, local expectations with regards to the commitment and contribution to the organization are growing. Increasingly, countries are moving to a system where the individual universities have a growing responsibility and oversight for their staff. This development may well strengthen the role of internal labour markets for academic careers.

Promotion systems

Traditionally, disciplines or specialities have been seen as major reference points in promotion systems that are dominated by the academic peer review process. Increasingly, research questions are formulated in inter-disciplinary and inter-organizational environments and thereby disciplinary attachments blur. This has effects on academics careers in terms of selection and promotion (that is, who is judging their work and on what grounds?), and their inter-organizational allocation to faculties or institutes.

Academic reputation as a key for progression

In addition, traditional academic criteria for excellence tend to be accompanied by emerging new criteria for success. Academics are, for example, increasingly expected to find and manage their own money, and success in acquisition becomes more and more important for both the organization and the individual researcher. Expectations with regards to the 'relevance' of academic work for other sectors and stakeholders in society are growing, and respective spin-offs and market-like activities are being incorporated into the academic reward system.

Positional hierarchies

Recent developments have created new positions and career paths around the traditional career ladder within academia. Similarly with other organizations that search for more flexible forms of employment, these positions form more or less peripheral rings around the core of the profession, with limited prospects to enter

the traditional career ladder. Thus, career management for new groups of staff and new forms of contractual arrangements have become more important.

Autonomy and 'free agency'

Within universities, academics are loosening part of their traditional guild power that protected their individual autonomy and their idiosyncrasies. Priorities in teaching and research are increasingly set by professional management. Also recent measures undertaken to steer and control the professional agenda of academics (preparation of work portfolios, performance contracts, time writing etc.) tend to limit the freedom of individual academics more than in the past.

Knowledge management

Increasingly regulation of knowledge is becoming a task for universities and their academic units. Regulating intellectual property rights for the benefit of both the organization and the individual, and organizing more explicit training for academics in teaching, research and management exemplify such a trend.

Use of flexible work arrangements

Various phenomena, such as growing expectations with regards to the regular attendance of individuals at their workplace; the assignment of staff to specific tasks and projects with recommended time and budget constraints; and, individuals spending time writing, signal that management technology is becoming a part of the academic workplace, which was previously unknown. Actually, awareness is growing that academia's most important and costly resource is its faculties' 'time'.

Division of labour

The re-organization of the academic workplace in search of effectiveness and efficiency has also had an impact on the division of work amongst individuals. Traditionally, the main boundaries within academia were set around the disciplinary 'tribes' and their 'territories'. Nowadays, universities tend to break up the teaching-research nexus to professionalize their management. Different sub-units for teaching and research are created, money flows through different channels for teaching and research, and staff may be assigned more exclusively to research, teaching or management. In addition, new forms of division of work within the main work areas have appeared. Certain individuals design curricula, others prepare course material, while others teach in the classroom and set exams. Bigger research units employ staff to scan their resource environment to write research proposals, with other staff managing money flows and human resources into the research projects.

Organizational commitment and collegial solidarity

The growing need to profile individual universities and to commit faculties to the mission of the institution, calls for a new organizational identity among the faculties. Teamwork within and across organizational sub-units is growing, while the 'group' becomes an important unit to measure success alongside the individual scholar.

As indicated above, the fit of academia with the contemporary models of 'old' and 'new' careers is contested. Various drivers affect academic careers

in multiple and partly ambiguous ways that contribute to the ongoing binding and unbinding of academic careers. This may in effect mean that we observe a narrowing gap between career models in academia and the corporate world. Corporate career models seem increasingly to pick-up elements that traditionally played a defining role in the academic world. In turn, academia has picked-up certain elements of traditional corporate models for professional careers. This also implies that the university is no longer, or at least to a lesser extent, unlike any other organization.

Preliminary summary and outlook

In this chapter, we have sought to increase our understanding of academic careers through the analysis of the (changing) contexts that govern academic careers. We have discussed the specificities of academic careers, and have examined the extent to which academic career structures conform to boundaryless characteristics discussed in the 'new careers' literature. We have argued that academic careers traditionally possess certain features of bureaucratic, hierarchical in-house careers, while many others made them markedly different from such a conventional model.

Furthermore, the changing context of academic work was addressed to examine possible implications of apparent drivers of change on academic careers. Trends towards marketization, managerialism and internationalization are likely to create another mix of 'old' and 'new' features in which academic careers become more bound and also unbound. Various developments point in this direction, such as the growing expectations on inter-sectoral co-operation and the international mobility of faculty members, the growing use of part-time and adjunct staff, the erosion of traditional concepts of tenure and experiments with alternative contracts. On the other hand, recent changes in universities point toward policies and practices that are moving from a collegial models of governance to management models which are aligning the academics' activities more closely with the interests and needs of their organization, therefore strengthening the role of universities' internal labour markets for academic careers. Such developments mean that academic careers also become more bound to their organization.

We limited ourselves to a discussion of the conceptual map of what might be called the 'objective face' of the changing contexts and conditions that govern academic careers in highly industrialized countries. Many of these countries are currently re-thinking the role of higher education in the move towards the 'knowledge society'. This makes further international comparisons between the changing institutional contexts of academic careers and their impact on career structures an interesting field for further studies, in particular to extend and deepen our understanding of the changing formal and informal rules in academic careers. Furthermore, macro- and micro-research could provide further insight into how the changing institutional arrangements can be traced to the career experiences and practices of academics. Such an analysis of human agency within the institutional context would involve the investigation of academics' perception and knowledge of, career-related social structures in academia as well as career-related motivations, aspirations and experiences. Thus, it is an empirical task to reconstruct the relative

importance of rules and resources that shape academics' career actions and how they differ between certain social settings.

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