

The Changing Academy – The Changing Academic Profession
in International Comparative Perspective 13

William K. Cummings
Ulrich Teichler *Editors*

The Relevance of Academic Work in Comparative Perspective

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Scope of the series

As the landscape of higher education has in recent years undergone significant changes, so correspondingly have the backgrounds, specializations, expectations and work roles of academic staff. The Academy is expected to be more professional in teaching, more productive in research and more entrepreneurial in everything. Some of the changes involved have raised questions about the attractiveness of an academic career for today's graduates. At the same time, knowledge has come to be identified as the most vital resource of contemporary societies.

The Changing Academy series examines the nature and extent of the changes experienced by the academic profession in recent years. It explores both the reasons for and the consequences of these changes. It considers the implications of the changes for the attractiveness of the academic profession as a career and for the ability of the academic community to contribute to the further development of knowledge societies and the attainment of national goals. It makes comparisons on these matters between different national higher education systems, institutional types, disciplines and generations of academics, drawing initially on available data-sets and qualitative research studies with special emphasis on the recent twenty nation survey of the Changing Academic Profession. Among the themes featured will be:

1. Relevance of the Academy's Work
2. Internationalization of the Academy
3. Current Governance and Management, particularly as perceived by the Academy
4. Commitment of the Academy

The audience includes researchers in higher education, sociology of education and political science studies; university managers and administrators; national and institutional policymakers; officials and staff at governments and organizations, e.g. the World Bank.

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Editors

The Relevance of Academic Work in Comparative Perspective

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Chapter 1

The Relevance of the Academy

William K. Cummings and Ulrich Teichler

1.1 Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, frequent and profound questions are being raised concerning the purposes and accomplishments of contemporary higher education and learning. We note a lively debate on the current issues and on the future of higher education in the public policy domain, within the higher education system, and among researchers specialized on higher education as their theme of inquiry.

For a long period, issues of higher education have been addressed with little attention paid to the academic profession, i.e. those persons who are in charge of the daily life of research, teaching and whatever else is understood to belong to the core functions of higher education: How they interpret the tasks and challenges of higher education and what they do that actually shapes the processes and the outcomes of higher education. In recent years, however, the academic profession has become a focus of systematic inquiry. The comparative study of the academic profession in more than a dozen countries in the early 1990s, initiated by the U.S. based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, often is considered

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the starting point of systematic worldwide inquiry (Altbach 1996). A more recent comparative study “The Changing Academic Profession”, initiated by scholars from various countries, comprised even 19 higher education systems and also provided information on recent developments, such as the impact of internationalisation, the growing power of management, and the rising expectations as far as the relevance of higher education is concerned (see the major results in Teichler et al. 2013). Actually, various chapters of this volume draw either from both surveys or notably the latter survey. In addition, we note quite a substantial number of recent studies on the views and activities of the academic profession that focus on specific countries, specific career stages, or specific areas of context and activities.

In order to synthesize the state of knowledge and to identify key issues that deserve more attention in future analysis, an international conference “Changing Conditions and Changing Approaches of Academic Work” was held on 4–6 June 2012 in Berlin. The conference brought together more than 200 experts from more than 40 countries—among them many who had been active in research on the academic profession. The conference was arranged by the Centre for Higher Education Research of the University of Kassel (INCHER–Kassel). It was made possible by generous support from the German Ministry of Education and Research.

The coordinators of the conference came to the conclusion that a few themes were frequently touched upon by the various contributions to the conference that might deserve special attention. These eventually were reflected in the titles of two books comprising the major contributions, i.e. “Relevance of Academic Work in Comparative Perspective” (this book) and “Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession”.

The editors of this book are grateful for the substantial support provided by various institutions and persons: The Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Berlin and Bonn, for supporting the conference financially; the International Centre for Higher Education Research of the University of Kassel for arranging the conference, Katharina Benderoth and many of her colleagues for managing the conference as well as Christiane Rittgerott and Dagmar Mann for taking care of the editing process.

1.2 Relevance—From What Perspective?

Relevance is a term employed with a relatively positive normative thrust for addressing the outcomes of higher education in general or more specifically the outcomes of academia that impact society. Such outcomes might include the utilization of knowledge by graduates from institutions of higher education and the contribution of systematic knowledge to technological advancement, economic growth, societal well-being and cultural richness. It might also include the practical endeavors of higher education beyond the creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge—for example, health services in university hospitals, community services, internships, or the direct involvement of academics and students in political processes.

Yet, the discourse on issues of relevance does not always have a positive tone. Political leaders and economic leaders might have very articulate expectations as regards what higher education should “deliver” and might assert that higher education is “esoteric” and “ivory-tower” if it does not follow suit. Parents and children might question the appropriateness of higher education if it is not geared to the expectations of “status seekers”. In response, these external expectations might be viewed by academics as subordinating knowledge to “finalized” expectations, thus hindering the “pursuit of knowledge for its own sake”, as well as the preparation of graduates for “indeterminate” work tasks. Finally, representatives of higher education often point out that they themselves may be “relevant” in a way that is neither called for nor desired by society: They call into question the prevailing norms of society, challenge conventional wisdom, and serve a critical function.

This book addresses the relevance issue in higher education primarily from the point of view of academics. Many contributions of this book draw from surveys aimed at understanding how academics perceive societal expectations and how they define themselves and their tasks. Their views are highly interesting in this domain, because on the one hand societal expectations as regards higher education have become quite explicit and pressing in recent years (see the overview of the discourses in Cummings 2006; Brennan 2007) and the academics, on the other hand, have enormous room for manoeuvre in reflecting on the objectives and in shaping the priorities of their professional work (see the overview of respective survey results in Höhle and Teichler 2013).

1.3 What Is “Relevant” Varies by Time and Place

In sketching the history of higher education according to its societal embedment we have to point out that the issue of relevance was high on the agenda from the beginning. By tracing the history of modern universities back to its European origins more than 800 years ago (see Rüegg 2000–2011), we note that the classical university was established to serve the needs of the Holy Roman Church in managing a large and geographically dispersed religious bureaucracy in the context of a primarily agricultural economy. Hence law, language, philosophy and theology were of high relevance. Over the decades, the religious centers diversified and the governments became the most important reference power of universities, while a similar range of disciplines, with a growing presence of medicine, dominated up to the nineteenth century. Since the nineteenth century with the emerging industrialization and modernisation, the relevant external powers became more diverse. Correspondingly the disciplines within higher education increased with a growing emphasis on the natural sciences and engineering. Over the latter half of the twentieth century we find a growing emphasis on the social and life sciences as well as medicine.

In recent years, we note an increasing variety of narratives as far as the disciplinary developments and their relationships to societal expectations are concerned. On the one hand, claims are made that global trends, for example, recently coined as heading