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The professoriate: changing realities, attitudes and perceptions of higher education's elite community in the UK and the USA (0060)

Outline

As higher education in the UK and the United States has become a 'mass' educational system, so too membership of the professoriate has become something of a mass occupation (in this paper I will refer principally to those who are professors in the UK or 'full' professors in the US).

When it began in 1851 the University of Manchester in the UK had six professors; by 2010 it had nearly 700. Eighty-five years ago, there were in all 766 full-time professors at UK universities. By 2010 that number had increased to more than 15,000, along with 2,000 part-time professors – around one in ten of UK academics, including research-only staff. ¹

One in five UK professors were women in 2010, compared with nearly one in two academics of other ranks. 93% of professors were white, compared with 90% of the British population in 2009; by comparison 89% of other UK academics were white (where ethnicity was known).

In the United States, one in four full-time faculty in the United States are full professors. Full-time full professors are predominantly male and white. Male faculty are far more likely than their female colleagues to be full professors. One in three male faculty are full professors, compared with only one in six female faculty. Eighty-five percent of full-time professors were white (where the race/ethnicity was known), whereas only 71% of full-time assistant professors were white. ²

The number of full-time full professors in the United States has grown considerably, and the demographic profile of professors is gradually changing. In 1985 there were 129,000 full professors, rising to 178,000 a generation later, a rise of 37%. The proportion of males has fallen, from 88% in 1985 to 72% in 2009. The proportion of male faculty who are professors has fallen from 34% in 1985 to

¹ Author's calculations using data provided by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency

² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2010, Table 260

31% in 2009; the proportion of female faculty who are professors has risen from 12% to 16%. The proportion of full-time full professors who are white has fallen from 90% in 1985 to 85% in 2009, while the proportion of full-time assistant professors who are white has fallen from 88% in 1985 to 71%.³

Inevitably the growth of the size of the professoriate has reduced the sense in which professors are seen as exceptional people in society. As Kogan and Teichler have noted, one impact of the expansion of student numbers has been to undermine the social exclusiveness of the professoriate; at the same time, the status of university management has been elevated.⁴ Welch considers that the loss of 'exclusiveness and privileged market position' has affected the whole of the professoriate.⁵

Professors are no longer seen as sacrosanct. Altbach in 1998 observed that the traditional high status of the profession had been 'diminished by unrelenting pressure in the media and elsewhere'.⁶ No doubt his opinion will have been reinforced by the publication in 2006 of the book by David Horowitz, *The Professors: the 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. Horowitz says, in McCarthyite tones, 'this is the tip of an iceberg that probably includes between 30,000 and 60,000 faculty activists whose agendas are political and radical'.⁷

This paper considers the challenges facing the professoriate, including the changing types of knowledge required (discipline-based or multi-disciplinary, 'useful' or fundamental),⁸ and the changing nature of leadership in higher education institutions, with many professors feeling excluded from managerial decision-making.⁹ As Bleiklie has observed, 'Modern universities are no longer collegiate

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 1990, Table 207

⁴ Maurice Kogan and Ulrich Teichler (eds.) (2007), *Key Challenges to the Academic Profession*, UNESCO/Kassel, introduction, p.9-10

⁵ Anthony Welch (2005), *Challenge and Change: the Academic Profession in Uncertain Times*, in Anthony Welch (ed) (2005), *The Professoriate: Profile of a Profession*, Dordrecht: Springer, p.10

⁶ Philip Altbach (1998), *An International Academic Crisis? The American Professoriate in Comparative Perspective*, *Forum Futures* 1998
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ffp9809.pdf> accessed 22 June 2011

⁷ <http://old.nationalreview.com/interrogatory/qa200603130909.asp> accessed 22 June 2011

⁸ Kogan and Teichler, *op cit*, p.10

⁹ Bruce Macfarlane (2011), *Professors as intellectual leaders: formation, identity and role*, in *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 36, No. 1, February, p. 71

bodies of professors in which other employee groups and students are excluded from decision-making.’¹⁰

Nevertheless, the picture is not entirely negative. Henkel found a number of senior academics who considered that academics had become more professionalised in recent years, and that new recruits to the profession were more focused and efficient.¹¹ And Bleiklie writes: ‘Although the professors have lost their absolute power and even majority on university and faculty boards, positions like department chair, dean, rector, vice chancellor or president are still usually open only to persons that are or have been full professors.’¹²

The challenge for the professoriate is to come to terms with an academy where institutional leadership is seen ‘as a task radically different from research and teaching’,¹³ and to adapt to the changing expectations of academic leaders, as set out by Bleiklie (2005) and Macfarlane (2011), among others.

The paper will make reference to international data relating to senior academics from the Changing Academic Profession study of 2007, including their involvement in different academic employment functions; their attitude to their profession; their sense of job satisfaction; and their views on research, on changes to their working conditions and on their level of influence in their institution.

¹⁰ Ivar Bleiklie (2005), *Academic Leadership and Emerging Knowledge Regimes*, in Bleikle and Henkel, *Governing Knowledge*, Dordrecht: Springer, p. 193

¹¹ Mary Henkel (2000), *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, p. 264-5

¹² Bleiklie, *op cit*, p. 195

¹³ Bleiklie, *op cit*, p. 203