

Teaching profession or teaching professional? Professionalization in the HE landscape (0212)

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The UK professional standards framework and the four associated categories of fellowship form one of the success stories of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and indeed higher education, of the last five years. The proportion of teaching academics who have gained one or other of the categories of HEA fellowship is rapidly approaching 50%. We may well be approaching a tipping point, where our profession changes from being inclusive – where fellowship is a mark of achievement – to exclusive – where fellowship is a necessary credential. Which kind of profession is appropriate for our calling?

University lecturers have never fought for professional status, whereas other teaching groups, such as secondary school teachers had to fight hard for it (Hoyle & John, 1994). The Robbins Report (1963) assumed we were professionals. The reasons for this go back to the origins of the universities and the learned professions in the middle ages (Crook, 2008), with at least one author (Brundage, 2008) pointing back to Roman times and the origins of the legal profession in the Roman college of pontiffs. There is little doubt that the professions and the universities have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship over the centuries, based on the shared need to prepare young professionals for their future career and the shared benefit of providing associated credentials.

Thirty four years after Robbins, the Dearing Report (1997) made professionalization of university lecturers one of its key recommendations. This is not so surprising a reversal when you consider it how much the landscape of HE had changed. It had grown in size, by almost a factor of 10; investment per student had declined to a marked extent; the polytechnics had been founded, flourished, and then transformed into post-92 universities. Professionalization was one agenda amongst many – managerialism, marketization, accountability, TEL, employability – all have had, and continue to have, their impact. The Dearing Report recommended the foundation of the ILT, quickly subsumed into its successor, the HEA, and this organisation has championed the professionalization of teaching academics to great success.

Becoming a profession is not always an unmixed good. Several authors point out the risks and costs, both to the professionalized group and to society at large (Friedson, 1994; Illich, 1977). It is, therefore important that the teaching profession in HE adopt the right professional model and think about whether the mode of professionalization will achieve that model.

Wilensky, in an influential 1964 study of professionalization, based on a definition of professions in the private sector, derived a “multi-stage temporal model” for professionalization of occupations (Wilensky, 1964: 142-146, cited in Neal and Jordan, 2000):

1. The occupation became the full-time occupation of its practitioners, rather than being practised “piece-meal”.

2. The training of practitioners became increasingly institutionalised and prescribed, generally eventually gaining the status of a specialty at a university.
3. An exclusive professional association was formed.
4. The association used its influence to obtain “protection by law” – excluding anyone from practising the occupation, unless they were qualified.
5. A “code of ethics” was drawn up – a set of rules “to eliminate the unqualified and the unscrupulous, to reduce internal competition, to protect clients and emphasise the service ideal” (ibidem).

The professionalization of teaching in HE does not fit the Wilensky model well:

1. Teaching HE was, and is, not exclusively full-time and there is no move to make it so. Much of it is still practised “piece-meal”.
2. The training has become entirely institutionalised, with most HEIs offering their own qualification-based ITE, almost all accredited by the HEA.
3. More than one professional association have been formed, including the HEA and SEDA.
4. There has been no move to have the profession “protected by law”, however fellowship is increasingly becoming a necessity for individual practitioners. It is fair to say that this sense of “becoming a necessity” is driven by other agendas within HE, such as marketization, and are very much part of a top-down change.
5. A less than formal code of ethics has been drawn up, the UKPSF, which is not at all a set of rules but which does include professional values.

This paper reports on the casestudy of a London HE institution and the academics within it who are inducted into the teaching profession through an initial teacher education (a Postgraduate Certificate in HE), and those who gain their teaching credential through an institutional fellowship recognition scheme. Through the analysis of interview data, it compares their perceptions of professionalism in their practice, and their views on the UKPSF and the benefits and costs of fellowship. It looks at the perceived efficacy of reflective practice as a mode of professional communication and reports on attitudes to some of the other agendas identified above.

In conclusion, it argues that professionalization operates at both at the level of the individual academic and at the level of the HEI, and that far from being an agenda in competition with the other agendas above, it is in fact interrelated to them with many of its drivers deriving from concepts of market competition and accountability.

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