

How to Be a Professor in the Twenty-First Century

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“We’re heading for a time where you have intellectuals, on the one hand, and academics, on the other, and where, at the university, you will find only academics.” The colleague who, about twenty years ago, addressed these words to me recently retired. At that time, we stood up together for the rights of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. We didn’t belong to the permanent academic staff. Upon his retirement, I remembered his words and repeated them to him. We had seen them come true in a frightening way.

It is no revelation that the university landscape has changed dramatically in recent decades. Nor do we lack analyses that lay bare the causes. These are usually referred to as the results of the so-called “neo-liberal policy model,” based on an unrelenting belief in the forces of the market and thus in boosting “output” and generating external funds (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000; Fleming, 2021).¹ That such a policy would prove disastrous for non-profit institutions and, within the academic landscape, for all non-industrial disciplines, seems obvious.

The former vice chancellor of a leading university in Northwestern Europe and a pivotal figure in the “neo-liberal reform” of the universities in his country once remarked that there were “too few students going in the right directions,” i.e. in the technical and industrial sciences, and therefore too many going in the wrong directions, i.e. “in the humanities.”² A look at the actual situation might reassure him: since he made his statement, enrollment in the “wrong” faculties has dropped dramatically. The neo-liberal policy model of the past decades has borne fruit. Of their own accord, people align their professional and educational choices with its objectives and, therefore, the social implications of this model can now be felt everywhere.

Of course, this has far-reaching consequences. Faculties such as those in the humanities and the arts are faced with harrowing financial cutbacks. They have to look desperately for ways to ensure their survival and, strangely enough, they mostly do so by responding precisely to the demands imposed upon them by the neoliberal policy model. The outcome is easily guessed. Whoever brings in money is rewarded. Thus, everyone starts looking for opportunities to strengthen their own position within the university institution that wants to profile itself as an academic business enterprise. Education is compromised in

the first place, in spite of any protest that this is a university's most important social task. Nevertheless, university policy in general shows that whoever puts too much effort into education is punished.³ This does not pay off, at least not immediately, and the university, like all "neo-liberal" institutions, mainly wants to generate income in the short term.

Europe offers another opportunity for those who want to make a fast career. Anyone who succeeds in obtaining European funding is welcomed with open arms by many universities and can immediately count on a permanent position, without any questions asked as to whether the scholar's specialization was necessary or an asset to the existing research or educational programs. Nor is it asked which criteria Europe applies and whether they correspond to a university's requirements of its staff. The millions in monetary resources coming in outweigh any internal policy concern (Schinkel, 2018). Researchers with little or no experience in academic education or administration will be in charge of the university for decades to come. In the meantime, absenteeism is increasing in internal councils and boards whenever they are purely policy-related and do not yield any immediate financial benefit.

Anyone who cannot knock on Europe's door or does not have the right keys to obtain European funding must secure a position in another way.⁴ One such option is to become a member of those committees where money and doctoral scholarships are distributed. The past decades have seen an increase of the well-established phenomenon whereby academics manage to accumulate funds in certain councils, boards and committees while serving as a member of them. Objections are almost always countered by the statement that only the top of the research landscape is represented in such committees. However, it remains mostly unclear which criteria are used to select this elite.

Administrative positions are also limited. What can be done by those who, for whatever reason, do not qualify for similar functions? Academic funding based on output focuses on the production of articles and defended PhD dissertations. They constitute quantifiable academic production. Academics thus have to publish a great deal. They must produce an avalanche of articles. Anyone who succeeds in this is a good academic and can count on recognition with all the associated benefits. Nobody bothers about the content of such overproduction. At a meeting of my own faculty board, I heard, to my astonishment, a member of the university administration say bluntly: "It's not quality that counts. It's quantity." It should come as no surprise, then, that no questions are raised as to how an academic can find the time to produce the required quantities. And that is where the shoe really starts to hurt.

For one, plagiarism has become a significant phenomenon in academic publications. Journals, review sites and editors all have to find ways to cope

with this increase of intellectual theft. And more often than before, scholars see themselves confronted with colleagues who “make use” of their results without referring to their sources. One of the main problems, however, is that plagiarists can avoid consequences once they are established names or belong to established universities, or as soon as this could mean a financial loss for their universities. The victims are mostly younger scholars who have yet to establish a scholarly reputation, or scholars employed by universities that do not belong to the select “highly rated” happy few. Rarely is the damage to their career recovered.⁵ But younger scholars can fall victim to other abuses, as well.

If one browses through academic bibliographies at some universities, one might notice that a majority of publications are the work of multiple authors. The academic world seems to be an ideal world where everyone works together to achieve a beautiful joint result. Unfortunately, in many cases, the underlying reality turns out to be less rosy. Of course, fortunately many researchers work, in good conscience, together with their collaborators to achieve shared and common results and publications. But in too many cases, the truth behind such “co”-publications looks quite different. Often, the highest-ranked in the local university hierarchy simply puts their name above an article without even looking at it. The actual author suddenly sees his or her own work partly or even completely pass into the hands of someone else.

In the humanities, reference is invariably made to established practices in the applied sciences. As if there were no protest in the applied sciences against similar forms of appropriation! Internationally, criticism is growing, especially in the medical field, precisely because here these practices also extend to the work of students and interns.⁶ But even apart from this, it is clear that research in the humanities is strongly based on individual commitment. Projects over long periods of time in which many researchers each carry out a small step that contributes to some far-off result are rather the exception. For this reason, any individual input must be recognized with credit given to the person who provided it. This is not only a moral obligation. It moreover avoids the violation of the right of authorship. Authorship is considered inalienable, unlike copyright (Nwabachili & Nwabachili, 2015).⁷ For academics, the difference is virtually unknown, which means that, more than once, they commit intellectual theft.

Supervisors often derive their right as “co-authors” from the fact that they acquired the funds for the research. For this reason, they consider everything that is paid for by these funds to be their property. They probably envisage a parallel with what happens in industry. They do not realize, however, that, as opposed to industrial funding, they do not invest anything themselves and that the only one who can assert ownership rights is the funding association. The supervisor is no more than an intermediary who ensures that the investment

(in the arts and humanities, it is usually public money) ends up with a capable researcher. For this reason, he or she cannot assert any right of ownership.

In all these cases, however, the researchers who are in one way or another involved in the publication usually act as supervisor of the actual author. But there are others who impose themselves without any official link to the author. Or who first impose a link—by making themselves co-supervisors—in order to assert themselves as “co”-authors and increase their quota of publications. Such researchers display a remarkable broadness in the specter of their expertise. They seem at home in almost all the disciplines that can be found at their home faculty. The way they manage this is by imposing themselves both on younger colleagues who are not yet adapted to modern academia and its customs and, of course, on the PhD students who feel their academic career to be under threat if they do not comply.

It is possible to go still further, for example, by appropriating the entire research of a PhD student who is subordinate to you. At international congresses, you present research as your own and under your own name, although everything you present has been collected and written by someone else to whom you refer as to “your” PhD student. Preferably, he or she should be in the room in order to answer any questions that might come up after your lecture. This way, you even display your own “generosity,” because you give your students the opportunity to participate in the international debate.

Maybe you think that too risky? It is indeed easier to force the PhD student who does not want to continue, or who will in any case not secure a postdoctoral position, to leave behind all material. Now, you have ready-made texts to publish under your own name. Or you can open a page on social media for academics in the name of the student in question and upload one of the confiscated texts with your own name first. Preferably, of course, without the student knowing about it.

Does all this sound difficult to believe? Unfortunately, all these examples are drawn from real life. The victims are, of course, precisely those (post)doctoral researchers who form the unprotected middle management in many universities. They see their work published under another's name. Internationally, they lose credibility. Some obtain their doctoral degree with a dissertation based on articles that have all or largely been published with their supervisor or co-supervisor as their “co-author.” To what extent can they still claim to be the author of what they have written and published?

I saw several of them succumb to the never-ending pressure to publish, as imposed on them by their (co-)supervisor wanting to meet the required quota. The pressure can become unsustainable, as can the means of imposing it. In my immediate surroundings, I have known doctoral researchers who were so

severely bullied and harassed by their supervisors that they eventually needed psychiatric help. One of them is still partially incapacitated after years. Another was for three years refused even a single day off and ended up bed-ridden for a year, suffering from total burnout. Of course, such individuals are considered “unfit” for an academic career and shown the door. And the supervisors? They continue to have new victims assigned to them. For, painfully enough, many of those responsible at universities even appreciate that, in this way, doctoral researchers become accustomed to “normal” academic practice.

When addressing the question of how universities counter such practices, the answer can be as short as it is simple: nothing. University boards proudly refer to the many hotlines and committees, where complaints do indeed flow in and accumulate like litter in dead-end alleys. Nobody cleans up. If a complaint seeps through, it is “an individual case,” or university boards try to erase all unpleasant traces as quickly as possible and to exonerate the scholar involved, despite the severity of the charges. Whoever dares to stand up for the victims is quickly advised to be careful in order not to be accused themselves, ending up as a prosecutor against whom charges are brought in order to annihilate the charges he himself has brought.

One could even speak of a new kind of slavery that is developing in academia. Extra money is brought in by inviting scholars from outside Western academia. The prospects of an academic career in the West are indeed still appealing for many in less prosperous countries with fewer opportunities. Those invited do not know that their invitation is often also inspired by fundraising motives. Sometimes this is a painful discovery. For, as soon as the money is received, the presence of the invited scholar is less necessary. As soon as some tension arises, he or she can simply be dismissed without further explanation. That they gave up a life in their home country, that they brought over their partner and children, that they suddenly become illegal, without work and thus without a residence permit, seems of no importance to the inviting supervisor or university. Their case now falls under the jurisdiction of the police and social services. The check has been cashed.

It is painful to realize that most of the above excesses are not limited to younger academics who are obliged to think about their careers. Established professors are guilty, yet avoid consequences. Nor is this only a gender-related problem, in which the female side always is the victim. True, women seem to suffer more, and men seem to account for the majority of bullying behavior. But one might wonder if this distribution of roles is not due more to the still predominant male part in the higher university positions. Unfortunately, women in similar positions do not always behave differently as some of the aforementioned cases show, and as became clear from some of the #MeToo

discussions. As far as invited scholars from non-Western countries are concerned, the victims mostly are male.

The true problem must be looked for on a deeper level. It has to do with an incapacity to handle power over others, even in the slightest way. It has to do with loss of responsibility and respect toward the personal integrity of those who entrust themselves to your guidance and leadership.⁸ But how do you check it? How can a university—supposing there is a sincere desire to prevent harassment, bullying and power abuse among staff—be sure that the individual it hires has this sense of respect and responsibility, as well as the capability to handle power?

Somehow, this is an educational problem and, of course, it is not that different from the problem hovering in the background. A society that invests all its resources in those who know how to build up their career, irrespective of the human or material consequences, will in the end create people who do not care about the safety or health of others. Perhaps universities ought to resist these developments. Perhaps universities ought to create islands of human respect and responsibility towards the other, towards the world, towards the future. Perhaps they should. But in reality, they are adapting to a system that, in the end, is destroying the true missions of the university: high-level teaching, intellectual innovation and fundamental research.

One wonders why universities do not feel the need to keep the intellectual blazon pure. That is the impression they give, anyway, but it shouldn't really come as a surprise. Unfortunately, in recent history, universities have not often been shown to excel in intellectual resistance. They rather breed academics who are obedient employees.

When my colleague, twenty years ago, made the distinction between intellectuals and academics, he didn't have all these developments in mind. But he has been proven right, perhaps more so than expected. Does this mean that there are no intellectuals left at universities? Certainly there are some. But the number is growing of those working at universities in whom the academic has gotten the better of the intellectual, in whom the craving for a career has surpassed the urge to know. And what was once called "conscience" has become extremely rare at universities. But of course, conscience has nothing to do with either career or intellect. It would merely make the university more human.

Acknowledgement

This contribution is an enlarged version of my earlier Dutch opinion piece, "Hoe word je tegenwoordig hoogleraar?"

Notes

- 1 On the dangerous consequences for emerging countries and economies, see Kigotho (2018). See also Runia (2018).
- 2 André Oosterlinck in *De Standaard*, August 25, 2011.
- 3 For the Netherlands, see van Oostendorp (2019); for the UK, see Graham 2015, (p. 17). For an interesting (Canadian) gendered approach to the problem of academic teaching, considered as “care work,” see Fullick (2016).
- 4 For criticism of European Research Council policy, see Migliorato (2016) and Schneider (2017). See also Sylos-Labini (2014, 2016).
- 5 For just one example, see Anonymous (2017).
- 6 See the guidelines of ICMJE (n.d.) and COPE (n.d.).
- 7 See also the guidelines of US Legal (n.d.) and the EU (n.d.).
- 8 See Chapman (2013) and Zhao (2016). For an example, see also Hall and Betty (2020).

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