

*Careers of academics*

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Definition:

Academic careers: the sequence of positions over the working life of an academic, usually but not necessarily starting with a doctoral degree. The progression can be vertical – from assistant to full professor, horizontal – moving across institutions and/or countries holding the same academic title, it can also be a “regression” – e.g. from dean of faculty back to professor.

Synonyms: academic status, employment, positions

Uniqueness vs. comparability

Academic careers are a core aspect of the functioning of higher education, since they organize the division of labour among academic professionals, they design possible occupational trajectories and foster a constant and coherent reproduction of academic workforce. In doing so academic careers shape and delimitate the meaning and functions of academic expertise, the latter being further structured according to the fields of knowledge and to the rules and regulations underpinning higher education institutions. In other words, academic careers can be analysed according to the tenets of the academic profession, of the disciplines, of the higher education institutions and of the country (Clark 1983). It is then an empirical question to detect differences and similarities in a comparative analysis (Fumasoli 2014).

The field of higher education research has investigated academic careers generally assuming their uniqueness in relations with other careers. Consequently research has aimed to identify the distinctive features of academic careers, thereby fostering an important debate that has mainly shifted between two poles. On the one hand, survey-based research has provided a detailed characterization of academic careers through cross-sectional and/or longitudinal analysis (Teichler 1996). On the other hand, through a normative angle, academic careers have been scrutinized at the receiving end of managerialist pressures and New Public Management reforms. Against this backdrop academics (or professors) have partly lost their autonomy in handling selection, and promotion of other academics, giving way to bureaucratic forces in the coordination and control of the academic enterprise (Amaral et al 2002, 2003).

Building on a synthesis of research carried on academic careers, this article argues that academic careers could be profitably studied and debated within the broader ecology of occupational and professional careers. Along this line, academic careers could be analysed not only focusing on their particular aspects, but, equally, by contextualizing such distinctive characteristics in a larger landscape of co-evolving professions and career pathways (Abbott 1988). Additionally, the increasing number and variety of knowledge-intensive organizations constitute a broader context that is likely to affect substantially the academic profession and academic careers (Gorman and Sandefur 2011).

As a consequence, drawing on theoretical and analytical frameworks from the sociology of professions, career studies and organization theory allow us to understand three fundamental questions: 1) how academic careers are organized and evolve, 2) under which conditions academic careers display change and stability, 3) to what extent convergence or differentiation between academic careers and other professional careers can be observed. This approach appears equally helpful in delineating

effective policies aimed to improve the contribution, efficiency and accountability of the academic workforce and of the university in contemporary society.

### Convergence between academic and corporate careers

There are several dimensions that can be considered in order to analyse the changing academic careers. First, in practically all countries the higher education sector has expanded dramatically. This has created a paradoxical tension between the shortage of qualified academic staff to accommodate increasing numbers of students, and the increasing use of adjunct staff in order to respond to student needs in the short term. Second, academic careers vary in their degree of regulation, with the notable extremes of the US where salary and progression are mainly the result of individuals' negotiations within universities and European countries where universities, unions and ministries of education need to agree on the main aspects related to the structure of remunerations and promotions (Williams et al 1974). Finally, the organizational setting in which academic careers are embedded – that is, the university, has undergone several reforms to increase managerial coordination and control, accountability, as well as efficiency. This has put career structures under strain, as the traditional collegiate model where professors contributed significantly to decision making, or, at least, profited from extensive autonomy, has been limited by economic aspects, equality policies, and university strategies challenging the diversified academic discipline-based interests and practices.

While higher education research privileges a focus on how managerialist practices have affected academic careers, scholars in management studies have looked at how corporate careers have become more similar to academic careers (Baruch and Hall 2004, Harley et al 2004). First, such studies have highlighted how reviews of academics for tenure and promotion remain in the hands of their peers, and continue to be based on prestige indicators such as publications and citations. Second, university strategies remain substantially decoupled from academic career decisions, which continue to take place mainly in departments related to fields of knowledge.

Management scholars thus underline how academic careers, willingly or not, seem to influence innovative corporate career models, where rank and file positions typical of bureaucracies have now become less salient (DeFilippi and Arthur 1994, Arthur and Rousseau 1996, Peiperl and Baruch 1997, Hall and Moss 1998). Hence, it is argued, the corporate world has become similar to universities, as individual workers face fragmented, non-linear career pathways, which are based on their own expertise and readiness to be mobile across organizations and countries. Equally, like for academics, individually initiated careers and network building, as well as commitment to one's own field of expertise and project-based work have become more relevant than upward career progression through bureaucratic positions within a single organization (Baruch and Hall 2004).

However, at the same time, it can be observed that academic careers have also somewhat converged to other occupational careers. Reflecting the increasingly varied student population and more uncertain conditions for public funding, academic positions have become more differentiated. Thus, besides the traditional trajectories from junior through intermediate to senior positions, we can see nowadays several pathways and employment frameworks: from postdoctoral researchers, to tenure track junior to full professors. Even more importantly, this diversification is reflected in the increasing numbers of fixed-term contracts, teaching- or research-only employment, part-time positions. While this can be interpreted as a deleterious outcome of market forces and a drive towards short-term financial sustainability, uncertainty plays an equally important part: uncertainty in student enrolments, public funding and other funding sources, as well as uncertainty related to long-term governmental policies and economic and financial conditions, have pushed universities to use more and more flexible employment relations for their lecturers and researchers. As research on elite academics shows (Kwiek 2016, Maassen et al 2017), only few academics are able to take advantage of global academic labour markets, while a significant majority is left to spend years of incertitude and risk of academic drop-out.

## Empirical studies on academic careers

Drawing on scholarship in career studies, empirical research on academic careers can be reviewed according to the following dimensions. First, academic careers can be seen from either an objective or a subjective angle: on the one hand empirical analysis focuses on facts, numbers and indicators, on the other hand analysis addresses personal choices and individuals' agency (Gunz and Peiperl 2007). In other words, research on academic careers can be positioned on a continuum from a close focus on individual perceptions and choices in a life-long occupational pathway to the opposite end conceiving academic careers as a social phenomenon (Moore et al 2007). Methodologically studies on academic careers can be divided into retrospective and prospective, the first being a more traditional approach to explore and explain what has happened in the past, the latter involving observation taking place across present and future points in time when decisions on one's career are taken.

The field of higher education studies has seen three large international research projects on academic careers between 1992 and 2012. The first major study of the academic profession was the Carnegie Study, which involved 14 countries and more than 19,000 responses (Altbach 2000). Significant differences in job satisfaction and career progression options are visible not so much across countries, but among three groups differently located along academic career pathways: the university professoriate, junior academic staff and non-university professoriate (Teichler et al. 2013, pp. 5-6). The second major study of the academic profession was the Changing Academic Profession (CAP Study, 2004-2012). It involved 19 countries and focused on societal developments (relevance of knowledge, division of labour in national and international context), as well as on the institutional life within higher education institutions (influence of managerial power and pressures for the professionalization of academic work). Besides gathering almost 18,000 responses (Teichler, Höhle 2013: 3-5), this Study involved a subjective and individual angle, in that it analysed biographies and careers, employment conditions, the work situation of junior academics, their time budget, their assessment of their own professional situation, the different degrees of commitment to their discipline, their department and their institutions, and finally their job satisfaction. While significant differences emerged according to the national contexts, the study seems to confirm an increasing divide between professoriate and junior academics, the first enjoying permanent positions, autonomy of work organization and professional status, the second depending for several years of fixed-term contracts and poor ability to plan their careers in the long term (Teichler et al. 2013, pp. 75-116). The third study of the academic profession was the EUROAC Study on the Academic Profession in Europe, carried out in 2010 and including twelve European countries. This Study used a mixed-methods approach comprising an in-depth literature review (Kehm, Teichler 2013), quantitative analysis based on a survey (Teichler and Hoehle 2013) and interviews with 500 academics, administrators and managers in eight European countries (Fumasoli et al. 2015). The EuroAC results showed how short-term employment of junior academics has become internalized by the academic workforce and how international mobility has considerably increased, at least in some European countries, contributing to an internationalization of academic markets, careers and the academic profession itself (Goastellec and Pekari 2013).

These three large international studies have testified of the changing settings, identities and practices of academic careers, resonating with the broader literature of career studies and its focus in the last 2 decades on original, boundaryless, protean careers in a globalized world. On parallel scholars of higher education studies have focused on the academic profession and careers as social phenomena. Country-based case studies have offered an international comparative perspective on the configuration of the politics and policies of the higher education sector, of the organizational dimensions within higher education institutions and of the distinctive knowledge bases of disciplinary fields. The sociological fabric of academic careers has been investigated in an edited volume by Burton Clark (1987) through country cases in US and Europe as well as through cases related to disciplines and types of professional higher education. Musselin (2010) provides an analysis of academic careers in France, Germany and the US in the disciplines of History and Mathematics, highlighting how the articulation of supply and in academic labour markets on the basis of ideas of quality, of autonomy of higher education institutions and of institutional settings (e.g. recruitment committees).

Empirical studies on academic careers from an educational perspective have addressed the training and development needs of the academic workforce (Startup 1979, Chait and Ford 1982, Kogan et al

1994, Blaxter et al 1998, Sorcinelli et al 2006). More recently researchers of academic careers have adopted subjective approaches to investigate choice and identity in the building of individual academic career pathways. Along this line, Gopaul and Pifer (2016) offer a dialogic perspective on academic mobility in early career stages, reflecting on job insecurity, career uncertainty and the unknowns of international mobility. Higher Education (forthcoming) looks at the antecedents of academics' perceptions on job insecurity to investigate individual academics' agency in the unfolding of their careers. The effects of temporary contracts are addressed by Waaljer and al (2017) to scrutinize how early career researchers' lives and career plans are impacted. Clearly, research on growingly fragmented and insecure academic careers addresses a fundamentally problematic aspect of the contemporary academic profession, at the same time this type of research is potentially conducive to building theoretical and analytical bases to bridge studies on academic careers to the broader career studies scholarship, which have been tackling similar issues in the last two decades.

#### Drawing on multiple disciplines and methods for a future research agenda

This section advocates a multi-disciplinary and multi-level approach on academic careers that could expand the scope of theoretical and analytical development, as well as for empirical research (Arthur et al 1989, Khapova and Arthur 2015, Lee et al 2014). In this sense sociology, social psychology, economics and management studies, political science and public administration provide a significant toolkit of research topics, research questions and methods that enhance how we can shed light on academic careers.

A sociological perspective focuses on the meaning, understanding and identities that engage in the structuring and restructuring of academic careers within broader social structures. This allows to explore not only how academics perceive themselves and their work, but also the broader role of such expertise-based careers in the contemporary society. Also, it can open up a debate on whether and how such careers can be located within or outside universities and the higher education sector. Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer (2011) suggest a Bourdieu-based analytical toolkit built on multi-level analysis uncovering the structure-agency link, social, economic and policy contexts, and identities in changing academic careers.

At a more micro level social psychology look at the relations between individuals and groups and how such relations affect individual agency in the structures and processes of academic careers. Issues such as gender equality and inclusion of minorities, senior-junior relationships, coaching and mentoring would be central in this approach, which aims to highlight individual career enactment and construction, as well as peer learning and solidarity. For instance, Schrodtt et al (2003) have analysed the role of academic mentoring in the socialization process of junior staff.

An economic and managerial approach analysis the construction, distribution and consumption of highly qualified (and rare) human resources based on expertise and talent. How are academic careers efficiently, effectively, economically organized and structured? An instrumental logic looking at the odds between investment and contribution to economic sectors of society would be at the centre of an economic approach. Related to the economic approach, a strategic management view would also analyse the link between career structures and organizational output (Fumasoli 2014, Gornitzka and Maassen 2017).

A political science and public administration approach focuses on rational behaviour of the involved actors, the constellations thereof that emerge and the representation of interests of the different groups. Equally, this perspective would analyse how order and stability in academic career pathways are achieved through power relationships that reflect ongoing negotiations within regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic structures shaping roles and division of labour in the academic enterprise (see e.g. Musselin 2005).

When it comes to methods, in-depth qualitative analysis through interviews and focus groups has been carried out extensively, allowing for fertile insights on how academics perceive and interpret their career pathways, the challenges, pitfalls and opportunities academics are confronted with. Equally, the large

international surveys conducted in the CAP project and affiliates have allowed for gathering extensive database that offer many possibilities to conduct cross-country and longitudinal comparative analysis. These methods could be substantially integrated by the ethnography developed in general career studies, in order to gain further understanding and insight on the changing academic careers (van Maanen 2014). We refer in particular to the so-called diary studies, which allow to gain insight not only from logs held by academics, but also by academics' reflective analysis of their resumes. This seems to be particularly promising in order to understand the restructuring of academic careers: cv can be analysed as formal written texts, but also as interpretation of their authors or of other academics that can make sense of resumes as objects of interpretation when they acknowledge and validate experiences, expertise and skills as crucial elements for progressions in academic careers.

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