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## United Kingdom: an increasingly differentiated profession

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## **United Kingdom: An Increasingly Differentiated Profession**

John Brennan, William Locke, Rajani Naidoo

### **1. Preamble**

One of the interesting experiences of working with the international Changing Academic Profession (CAP) team in the planning of the new survey has been the definitional and terminological difficulties we have encountered. Just who is to count as an ‘academic’ and who not? What term best describes the people we are interested in? In some countries, it seems sufficient to use the term ‘professoriate’ to define the focus of our interests. In other cases, a looser notion of ‘academic staff’ is used, which can cause both concern and some status anxiety to the former group where ‘university staff’ are quite different people from the ‘professoriate’. The adopted term ‘academic profession’ appears to be an acceptable compromise, though we must note that the ‘academic profession’ lacks most of the characteristics ascribed to professions in the literature on the subject.

Set within this context, it is interesting to note, therefore, the title of a recent publication from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. *The Higher Education Workforce in England: A Framework for the Future* (HEFCE, 2006) is intended to be the first annual report on ‘workforce trends in HE’ in England. The production of such a report was at the request of the United Kingdom (UK) Government. So higher education in some countries has a ‘professoriate’ but in England it has a ‘workforce’. What, if anything, are we to make of this difference?

In this paper, we shall comment on the three main CAP themes – relevance, internationalization and management – from the UK perspective. First, however, we set out some background characteristics of the ‘academic profession’ in the UK.

### **2. Background**

Notwithstanding the ‘workforce’ terminology adopted by the English funding council, UK higher education is no different from other systems in employing a sharp distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ staff. It is a distinction

once described by an English vice chancellor as being of almost 'apartheid' proportions, affecting not just contractual and remuneration packages but rights to participate in university decision-making and even access to catering facilities. The distinction is qualified by the introduction in some universities of 'academic-related' staff to refer to those professionals working directly in support of academic activities (for example learning support, staff development (*sic*), technical support, etc.) and yet who are not regarded as *bona fide* 'academics'.

The standard academic career grades are 'lecturer', 'senior lecturer' ('principal lecturer' in the post-1992 universities), and 'professor'. There is no automatic career progression through these grades. Many academic staff begin and end their careers as lecturers. The status of 'reader' is the equivalent of senior lecturer in terms of remuneration but has more of a research focus and hence higher status. There are then a whole series of researcher grades – variously entitled research officer, assistant, fellow – which parallel the lecturer grades but are mainly used for short-term contracts and these days are typically the starting point of an academic career.

A relatively recent study (Henkel, 2000) has shown that, in general, while academics may see themselves as teachers, managers, researchers or a combination of all of these, their identities remain centered in their discipline and academic values are often embedded in concepts of the discipline and expressed in a common language.

UK academics are employed by the higher education institutions where they work. They are not civil servants and there are variations in job descriptions and conditions of work between different institutions. There are tensions between institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom in the UK system, which are probably not found in quite the same way in systems where the coordinating role of the state is stronger. As we shall see, the growth of market competition between institutions in UK higher education and a more 'consumerist' approach to regulating the system underlie many of the changes experienced by UK academics in recent years. However, lacking many of the direct controls possessed by its counterparts in continental European countries, successive UK governments have taken recourse to ever more complex mechanisms of 'steering at a distance'. The principal tools have been funding formulae and evaluation/accountability mechanisms. These have the effect of creating quite elaborate bureaucratic procedures within institutions and of producing greater competitiveness between both HEIs and individual academics (to secure positional advantage in various grading schemes and funding streams). They consume a lot of time and energy and create a considerable amount of stress.

### 2.1 The Profile of the Profession

There were over 160,000 academic staff in all UK higher education institutions in 2004/05 as shown in Table 1. 83 per cent were in England, 10 per cent in Scotland, 5 per cent in Wales and 2 per cent in Northern Ireland. Within England, the Funding Council identified some 130,010 staff with 'academic roles only', i.e. not combining this with a professional/support role. Not all were full-time and the figure shrank substantially to 96,966 when the number of 'full-time equivalents (fte)' was calculated. This represented just 44 per cent of the (fte) 'workforce', the rest comprising staff with a 'professional/support role only' who represent 54 per cent of the total, plus a further 2 per cent who combine 'professional/support and academic roles'. It is not clear whether the latter group includes vice-chancellors.

**Table 1: Academic Staff (excluding atypical) by Location of HEI and Mode of Employment**

Mode	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	All UK HEIs
Full-time	88735	5690	12540	2655	109625
Part-time	45395	2350	2770	520	51030
All	134130	8040	15310	3175	160655

Source: HESA, 2006.

The figure for academic staff represents an increase of 16 per cent since 1995/96 in the 'core' academic staff: these are staff on permanent contracts (lecturer/senior/principal lecturer and above). The overall growth rate over this ten year period has been 20 per cent, indicating a steeper growth in the numbers of staff on short-term contracts. The latter are mainly people on researcher grades. 72 per cent of academic staff are on lecturer scales, the balance being researchers.

Large growth areas in terms of subjects are 'subjects allied to medicine' (which experienced a 78 per cent increase since 1995/96), 'computer science, librarianship, information science' (60 %), 'creative arts and design' (50 %), 'business and administrative studies' (37 %) and 'biological sciences' (36 %). Over the same ten year period, there has been a decline in subjects such as 'engineering, technology, building and architecture' (minus 13 %), chemistry and medicine/dentistry (both minus 11 %). The academic profession in England is an ageing profession with the proportion aged over 50 having risen from 34 per cent to 41 per cent in the last ten years, being particularly high in education (51 %), mathematics (48 %), social and related studies (45 %), physics, engineering and related subjects, plus business (all 44 %) and humanities and languages (both 43 %). The proportion of professors over the age of 50 has risen from 59 per cent to 66 per cent (HEFCE, 2006: 12-

13). However, the academic profession in England is not as old as its counterparts in other English-speaking countries.

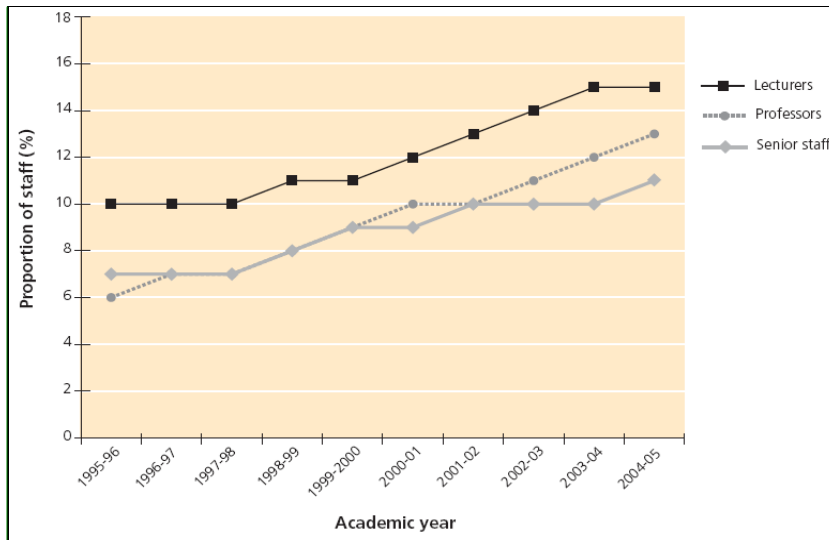
Across the UK, 40 per cent of academics are female and more than a quarter of these work part-time, compared with 16 per cent of male academics, and they are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts. On average full-time female academics earn 86 per cent of the pay of their male colleagues (AUT, 2005a). While female academics hold 41 per cent of all full-time posts in UK HEIs, the proportion of females holding professorial posts is only 16 per cent and senior lecturers and researchers 31 per cent (HESA, 2005).

10.5 per cent of academics are from black and ethnic minority (BME) groups, which is similar to the population of BME postgraduates in the UK population as a whole. However, they tend to be concentrated in particular institutions (Ramsden, 2006) and those with UK nationality are seriously under-represented. BME academics earn 88 per cent of the pay of their white colleagues, although this gap narrows for those of UK nationality (AUT, 2005a). Only 4.9 per cent of senior academics are from BME groups (HESA, 2006).

There has been a substantial growth in the proportions of foreign nationals among the academic staff of English higher education institutions, the largest growth rates being from eastern and central Europe (193 %), Western Europe and Scandinavia (146 %) and China, Japan and East Asia (108 %) over the ten year period. However, the vast majority of movement takes place among junior post-doctoral staff, and this is largely positive for the UK, with much less movement among staff later in their careers, allaying any residual fears of 'brain drain' (Bekhradnia and Sastry, 2006). Nevertheless, there is a growing dependence on non-UK nationals, now accounting for 13 per cent of core academic staff, a growth from 8 per cent in 1995/96 as shown in Figure 1 overleaf, broken down by grade. The proportion of professors who were not UK nationals has risen from 6 per cent to 13 per cent and of other senior academic staff from 7 per cent to 11 per cent. However, almost half of all non-UK academic staff are researchers, with Chinese nationals particularly prominent. Indeed, researchers constitute three-quarters of all Chinese staff in UK HEIs. Of those non-UK nationals employed to teach and research, academics from the United States, Ireland and other European and English-speaking countries are most prominent (Ramsden, 2005).

HEFCE has recently predicted an increase in academic staff recruitment by as much as 25 per cent across the UK between 2004 and 2011 (HEFCE, 2006). It notes the three main entry routes into academic careers as being (i) newly qualified PhD students, (ii) staff joining from the private sector or other parts of the public sector (very important in certain subject areas), and (iii) staff recruited from overseas. Of those recruited from outside higher education in recent years, over 40 per cent were aged over 40, which implies a substantial influx to the sector from beyond the traditional doctorate/post-doctoral route. The report also indicates low turnover and no major recruitment difficulties in recent years.

**Figure 1: Proportion of Permanent Academic Staff who were Non-UK Nationals**



**Comment [WL1]:** Can the box around this graph have a line across the top as well? Otherwise it looks a bit odd.

Source: HEFCE, 2006

### 2.2 The Conditions of Academic Work

Academic pay is relatively low compared with other highly qualified jobs in the UK. However, UK academic pay compares favorably with that in Sweden, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and is similar to that in Denmark, France and Canada. Unsurprisingly, it is lower than the US, and this difference is particularly marked among the top earners (Metcalf et al., 2005).

A recent study suggests that academic staff are somewhat less satisfied with their jobs than those in the UK workforce as a whole. The factors influencing this appeared to be salary and other earnings, qualitative aspects of the job and longer-term factors such as promotions and job security (Metcalf et al., 2005). Research was a major source of satisfaction, although it was also the area where staff feel under increasing pressure (Kinman and Jones, 2004). Support from peers and opportunities to participate in the wider academic community were also positively cited. Whilst teaching was not the most important factor in becoming an academic, most would prefer a job that involves teaching. Student assessment and administration (including quality assurance) tended to be viewed negatively, and being

on a fixed-term contract significantly reduced satisfaction (Metcalf et al., 2005). Another study concluded that job stress and demands have increased significantly in recent years while job satisfaction and levels of support have declined. Several sources of stress were identified that were related to features of national educational policy. High levels of psychological distress were found in comparison with academics in other countries and with other professional groups and the general population in the UK (Kinman and Jones, 2003).

Other background characteristics of higher education in the UK include the increasing differentiation of higher education in general and of universities in particular, over the last couple of decades. There are now around 168 universities which differ substantially in terms of reputation, resources and functional mix. In particular, there has been a national policy of concentrating research spending on 'centers of excellence' which has seen the growth in numbers of 'teaching-only' academics in some institutions. Approximately 24 per cent of academics in the UK were employed on teaching-only contracts in 2003/04, 22 per cent on a research-only basis and 52 per cent of academics were employed to teach *and* research (the latter two being declining proportions). The remaining 2 per cent were not employed to teach or research (HESA, 2006). It has been suggested that the rise in teaching-only contracts may be partly due to the re-designation by institutions of 'underperforming' researchers as a strategy for improving success in the periodic Research Assessment Exercise (AUT, 2005b).

The relationship between research and teaching is currently a 'hot topic' in some quarters with concerns being expressed about the impact on university teaching and academic standards of the removal of a research underpinning. The debate was stoked by the revision of the criteria for 'university' title in England following the 2004 Higher Education Act, which removed the requirement for HEIs to have research degree awarding powers. Even among existing universities, there are many that categorize around a quarter to one third of academics as teaching-only (AUT, 2005b). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the separation of research and teaching is itself the result of policy and operational decisions made over some time to distinguish the way these activities are funded, managed, assessed and rewarded (Locke, 2004).

The proportion of academics on fixed-term contracts is also increasing, with only 55 per cent employed on an open-ended or permanent basis (AUT, 2005b). Two-thirds of academics on teaching-only contracts are employed on a fixed-term basis, and 91 per cent of those on research-only contracts were fixed-term. By contrast, only 16 per cent of academics employed to teach and research were on fixed-term contracts. It is interesting to note that the proportion of academics on permanent contracts is lower in the high-status research-led universities - as few as 25.8 per cent at the University of Cambridge (Kim, 2006).

### 3. The Three CAP themes

This section comments on the three main CAP themes – relevance, internationalization and management – from the UK perspective.

#### 3.1 Relevance

At the head of a section entitled *Capacity and Composition of the Workforce*, the English funding council report, already referred to, removes any doubts about government priorities for higher education. In bold letters that fill the whole of a page, the report notes that:

“Increasingly, governments view higher education as an important driver of economic growth, both through the graduates that it develops and the new knowledge created by research. With increasing competition from developed and developing nations, and given the possibility of locating business operations anywhere in the world using communications and information technology, nations will need, through investment in people, to equip themselves to compete at the leading edge of economic activity” (HEFCE, 2006, p. 11).

Thus stated, this is the reason why universities receive public funding, why academic jobs exist, and why universities and the ‘higher education workforce’ are quite important.

‘Relevance’ in research and teaching are required in order to justify the flow of public resources into higher education. But increasingly, public resources are being augmented – if not actually replaced – by private funds, whether from students in the form of tuition fees or from enterprises commissioning research or, more broadly, ‘knowledge’ transfer. What is ‘relevant’ here reflects the objectives of higher education’s ‘clients’. If students are concerned about their job prospects after graduation, then universities and their academic staff must attend to these concerns in the design and teaching of their programs. If an organization funds a piece of university research to solve a problem in its ‘space utilization’, then the resultant research will be judged in terms of the ‘solution’ to the problem. The demand for relevance is frequently heard but its definition can vary substantially. Relevance is not necessarily ‘short-term’, although frequently it is. It is not necessarily about wealth creation – whether for the nation, a region or an individual – although, again, frequently it is. Relevance also embraces a social justice agenda through the expectation that higher education will contribute to social equity and mobility through widening and expanding access and creating links with communities.

The point about ‘relevance’ is that it is generally defined by other people. Academics may claim it for their teaching or research, but it will be for others to assess the validity of these claims. There are a growing number of mechanisms within UK higher education through which relevance is assessed and promoted.



Some of these have to do with markets – the need to attract students to courses and the need to obtain research funding. Others have to do with the ‘machineries of stearage’ that have been introduced by the agencies of the state in recent years. And insofar as most academics would prefer to see their activities as being ‘not entirely useless’, the debate about relevance is perhaps best seen as a battle over its definition than about its overall desirability.

Several of these concern the criteria used in the various national systems of evaluation and quality assessment. In teaching, there has been a growing emphasis on the articulation of learning outcomes – and the value of these to future (working) lives. Curricula are described and justified in these terms. In research, the various research councils – also needing to justify their receipt of public monies – dispense increasing proportions of their research grants through special schemes and initiatives created to meet some perceived public need. Research projects identify ‘user groups’, have ‘dissemination strategies’ and their steering groups contain rather more users and policy makers than researchers and academics. One of the few remaining counter pressures to this is the evaluation of research by discipline-specific peer review, although even this is now in jeopardy.

There are strong interdependencies between the goals of higher education, the rules for distributing resources, and the nature of academic work. The changes associated with movement from the ‘traditional academy’ with its stress on basic research and disciplinary teaching to the ‘relevant academy’ are largely uncharted and are likely to have unanticipated consequences. There is a need to understand how these changes influence academic value systems and work practices and affect the nature and locus of control and power in academe. There is a need to investigate how these tensions work out in higher education institutions of different types and in countries with different economic, political and cultural traditions and contemporary circumstances.

### 3.2 *Internationalization*

National (and local and regional) traditions and socio-economic circumstances continue to play an important role in shaping academic life and have a major impact on the attractiveness of jobs in the profession. Yet today’s global trends, with their emphasis on knowledge production and information flow, play an increasingly important part in the push towards the internationalization of higher education (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). The international mobility of students and staff has grown, new technologies connect scholarly communities around the world, curricula and credentials are required to have international currency, and English has become the new *lingua franca* of the international community. Competition between higher education institutions extends beyond the borders of the nation state. In particular, the research elite of institutions sees its rivals and refer-

ence groups in institutions across continents. Many institutions face the challenge of balancing the international with the local, the regional and the national.

International activities are an important business to UK HEIs. The total income to institutions attributable to overseas sources is a little over £1.5 billion, representing 10 per cent of the total income of the UK HE sector in 2003/04. This is made up largely of student fees (70 %) and research grants and contracts (13 %). But institutions benefit differentially from these overseas income sources, with approximately one-third of HEIs receiving less than 5 per cent of their income and a small group earning more than a fifth of their total income from overseas (Ramsden, 2005).

International students, in particular, are a vital part of UK higher education, with some institutions virtually dependent on them for their survival. On post-graduate courses in some areas, students from other countries can often constitute a majority. Such students need to be recruited, sometimes their language skills need to be improved and sometimes courses may need to be adapted to take account of the wide range of student backgrounds. Collaboration in Erasmus and other student exchange schemes is a further way in which many academic staff become involved in the internationalization of the teaching function. A related aspect of internationalization is the pressure to harmonize qualifications, systems and procedures. Within Europe, this is the 'Bologna process'. It is probably fair to say that UK higher education and academics have paid rather less attention to these processes than have their continental European counterparts.

Research has always had a strong international element to it, although more so in some subjects than others. It is now more important than ever with the national Research Assessment Exercise offering the greatest recognition and reward to those whose achievements are deemed to possess international excellence. There is some evidence to suggest that increases in research students in the UK are modest in comparison with those of non-research students (HEPI, 2004).

Much of the above could probably be said of academics working in many other countries. Some specifically UK aspects worth noting include the role of English language. This makes it much easier for UK academics to internationalize themselves and it is also one of the reasons for the popularity of the UK as a destination for international students. But another aspect of language is the role it sometimes plays in creating a somewhat narrow definition of 'international' as comprising a very small number of English-speaking former colonies. Some 'international' conferences and entire journals can be found that limit themselves to the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand with an occasional American squeezed in. Shared histories and traditions can provide some explanation of this phenomenon although it rather flies in the face of other globalizing trends.

### *3.3 Management*

The UK reflects the worldwide trend towards funding and accountability systems based on neo-liberal market mechanisms and new managerialist principles (Naidoo, 2003). Such frameworks are based on the assumption that market competition within and between universities will create more efficient and effective institutions and that management principles derived from the private sector which monitor, measure, compare and judge professional activities will enhance higher education functioning. There has therefore been a decline in state funding, an exhortation for universities to develop closer links with industry and a focus on income generation. In addition, external control over core aspects of academic life has become stronger through external quality assurance bodies and through a range of market mechanisms. A relatively recent development is the conceptualization of the student as a 'consumer' of higher education. Various consumerist levers to enhance student choice and control over the education process have been introduced or strengthened over the last ten years. Examples of such levers include the requirement that universities publish detailed information on academic programs so that students can be assured of what they are to receive at the outset of their studies and the publication of performance indicators evaluating institutional functioning. Most recently there has also been the introduction of a National Student Survey of all final year students. In addition, consumer rights have been strengthened by the elaboration and institutionalization of complaints and redress mechanisms (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005).

These developments have significant implications for how universities are managed, how decisions are made and the locus of control and autonomy in higher education. We will outline three dimensions.

First, the encouragement of quasi-market forces has led to greater competition and insecurity within the academic profession and greater differentiation in relation to roles, status and conditions of service. These differences have become more explicit in differential contracts and levels of remuneration. There is also evidence of increasing stratification of the HE workforce. The HEFCE report already referred to (HEFCE, 2006) indicated that institutions are increasingly using financial incentives to recruit or retain staff whom they perceive to be of high market value which include salary bonuses and retention payments. While salaries for Vice-Chancellors soared by a quarter in three years, academic salaries in general have deteriorated against other benchmark occupations.

Second, the implementation of elements of new managerialism as well as the threat of litigation by student consumers has led to academics experiencing tensions between what Power has termed 'first order' professional activities such as teaching and research to 'second order' activities which are related to documenting and accounting for professional work (Power, 1999). These developments are linked to 'performativity' by which we mean that the quality and relevance of

academic work has to be continually made visible and translated into a generic form so that managers with little specialist knowledge can monitor and evaluate academic work across all disciplines.

Third, relationships within higher education change. In one sense, UK universities have always been more managerial than their counterparts in many other countries because authority has been vested at the institutional level rather than with the state or with individual professors. Compared with other systems, professorial authority has been relatively weak and became more so following outbreaks of academic democracy in the 1960s and 70s.

However, the increasing bureaucratization of academic work has meant a greater shift in the relationships between academics and administrators. There are signs that a new generation of administrators has entered higher education to undertake strategic administrative and management functions such as quality assurance and marketing. Rather than merely servicing academics, they exercise independent judgment and exert influence on the structures and cultures with which they interact. They may also perceive of themselves as 'translators' between the academic and external context. For their part, academics may feel that their professional judgment and authority is being weakened. They may feel that rather than administrators meeting academic needs, it is academics that are in fact being coerced into meeting administrative goals.

A recently discerned trend is the growth of a cadre of 'academic managers'. Whereas there has been a tradition – especially in the older universities – of management tasks being assumed by senior academics on an elected, rotating, short-term and frequently part-time basis, this pattern is increasingly being replaced by appointment to full-time, 'permanent' management roles. This inevitably changes both the nature of the role and the relationships of the role-holder with academic colleagues. It is also a new element in the career options open to academic staff, providing opportunities to 'jump ship' from traditional teaching and research roles in order to focus on administrative and management tasks. Significant financial rewards frequently attach to these roles.

The re-conceptualization of students as consumers is also likely to alter pedagogical relationships. If education becomes re-conceptualized as a commercial transaction, the lecturer as the 'commodity producer' and the student as the 'consumer', previously integrated relationships between academics and students are likely to become more disaggregated with each party invested with distinct, if not opposing, interests. There is evidence of increasing student complaints, including threats of litigation. This change in climate is likely to impact on learning and teaching in both positive and negative ways.

Governance arrangements are also changing. Increasingly 'business-like' management styles have tended to go hand-in-hand with more corporate-style governance arrangements in HEIs, with a reduction in the size of governing bodies which now feature a majority of external members drawn largely from business sectors.

In parallel, academic self-governance has been weakened, the influence of academic senates has declined and the academic community marginalized (Shattock, 2002).

The changes in the style of management in UK higher education have been characterized as a shift from *professional oligarchy* to *managerial oligarchy*, which is claimed to be re-defining the academic profession, weakening its professional influence, reducing job security and economic attractiveness, and stratifying it so that “ordinary academics are now tightly managed as *employees*” (Kim, 2006). The columns below illustrate how institutional structures have been affected by this shift.

<b>Professional Oligarchy</b>	<b>Managerial Oligarchy</b>
Collegial structure	Management structure
– Professors (Chair); Research Professor	– <i>Manager-academics</i> : Vice-Chancellor, Pro-VC, Principal Rector, Director, Provost, Dean
– Reader	– <i>Middle manager-academics</i> : Dean, Associate Dean, Head of Department
– Senior Lecturer	– <i>Ordinary academics</i> : Teaching-only staff; Research-mainly staff
– Lecturer Research Lecturer	
– Contract research officers; Contract Part-time Lecturer (Teaching staff)	– <i>Contract research officers</i> ; <i>Contract part-time teaching staff</i>

(from Kim, 2006)

The managerial trend is frequently ‘blamed’ on the increasing pressures and complexities of ‘running’ academic institutions. To do it competently requires specialist knowledge and experience that can take some time to acquire. It becomes difficult to combine with the other elements of an academic career. Senior academic managers frequently complain about ‘losing touch’ with their disciplines and having ‘nowhere to go’ but to another management job if and when their current term of office comes to an end.

Managerialism is also becoming increasingly internationalized, with the appointment of several vice-chancellors from English-speaking countries to some of the most prestigious universities in recent years, including Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester and Warwick, as well as the ‘middle-ranking’ Brunel University, the

School of Oriental and African Studies and the Open University. 'Relevance' is also an issue for the headhunters, with the current 'chief executives' of the London School of Economics and Imperial College both recruited from high level positions in the business sector. Perhaps these are signs of interplay between our three themes, but are they the tip of the iceberg or a passing phase?

#### 4. Conclusion

Academics are faced by many (and sometimes competing) pressures related to the themes of relevance, internationalization, managerialism and marketisation. Many aspects of deeply entrenched professional practice continue while minor shifts and major changes occur through the sector. This is partially because academics differ in their degrees of embrace or resistance to such trends and may adopt a range of strategies including subversion and accommodation. Differences may of course reflect status within the academic hierarchy, subject characteristics and generational differences through younger academics entering higher education with different expectations and experiencing different forms of socialization into the profession. There is of course also plenty of compliance to be found in UK universities in response to external pressures.

In relation to the 'shape' of the profession, some elements of traditional hierarchies such as status based on age and length of service may be eroding while other elements, such as placing a high value on 'entrepreneurial' skills, are emerging. Other elements, including institutional reputation and status, are being reinforced and recast in different ways.

The picture thus emerging in the UK is of an academic profession facing increasing change but also much continuity and transforming relatively rapidly into a diversified and increasingly stratified sector.

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