Troubling the concept of the 'academic profession' in 21st Century higher education

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Abstract

Concern has been expressed about the vulnerability of the 'academic profession' as a consequence of threats from productivism, managerialism and the like (Beck and Young, Br J Sociol Educ 26(2):183–197, 2005). I question the apparent self-understanding of academe as a profession. Referring to thinking from higher education (Barnett, High Educ 40:409–422, 2000a; Educ Phil Theor 32(3):319–326, 2000b; Realizing the University in an age of supercomplexity, 2000c; Stud High Educ 25(3):255–265, 2000d; Lond Rev Educ 2(1):61–73, 2004a; Piper, Are professors professional? The organisation of University examinations, 1994; Taylor 1999), and from the sociology of the professions (in particular Evetts, Int J Sociol Soc Policy 23(4/5):22–35, 2003a; Int Sociol 18(2):395–415 2003b; Curr Sociol 54(1):133–143 2006a; Curr Sociol 54(4):515–531, 2006b), I propose that significant shifts in self-understanding and practice are needed for academe to claim a social role as a 'profession'.

Keywords: academic, higher education, profession, university

Introduction

As higher education faces a range of challenges presented by changing socio-economic environments, so the vulnerability of the 'academic profession' has been highlighted in higher education literature (Rowland 2002; Beck and Young 2005). This strand in the literature echoes concerns expressed with regard to other occupational fields such as pharmacy, teaching, and nursing (Traulsen and Bissell 2004; Stronach et al. 2002). What seems to be different, however, is that unlike the example of pharmacy, higher education literature appears in the main to assume that academe constitutes a profession (with the possible exceptions of Piper 1994 and Enders 1999, 2000). From this basis the task then appears to be to defend or re-envisage the profession (Nixon 2001).

I wish to trouble the underlying assumption of the professional status of academe by adopting a more agnostic position: why, and in what way, should academe be considered a profession?

Where may the professionalism or 'professionality' (Nixon 2001; Gleeson and Knights 2006) of academics lie? Is it in the social role (Archer 2000) they occupy (a matter of social structure) or in the way they occupy that role (a matter of agency), or both (Archer 2000; Gleeson and Knights 2006)? Are academics professional as discipline experts or as educators (Piper 1994; Taylor 1999)? What, at base, does it mean to be an academic?

A response to these questions within the limits of an article such as this is likely to be tentative at best. In part this is because as Taylor notes, ''… 'traditional' understandings of academics' sense of professionalism are neither fixed, nor closed… [but are]… social constructions—partial, patchy and incomplete'' (1999, p. 116). Further, the term 'profession' and its etymological derivatives now appear ubiquitous in this age of the professionalized society (Perkin 1989). As the ''professionalization of everyone'' appears to be an emerging social phenomenon (Neal and Morgan 2000) it seems possible that 'profession' may share the fate of Readings' (1996) vacuous 'excellence' to which it is frequently linked. Perhaps this could be expected given that much of the debate appears to assume a constant, universal set of characteristics by which the professions can be identified. It appears as if ''…the 'professional' is a construct born of methodological reduction, rhetorical inflation and universalist excess'' (Stronach et al. 2002, p. 110).

Cognisant of these cautions, in what follows I offer a brief socio-historical overview of the emergence of the occupational field of the academic. I then endeavour to link recent sociological insights into 'profession' (MacDonald 1995; Freidson 1986 and 1999; Evetts 2003a, b, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Gleeson and Knights 2006), with higher education theory (Barnett 2000a–d, 2004a, b in particular regarding emergence of the 'new university'), in order to consider whether, or in what way, academics may be considered professionals. In this process I will refer to another recent conversation on a 'new' academic profession introduced by Nixon (2001) and Nixon et al. (2001).

Coming to terms: 'academic' and 'profession'

Neither the terms 'academic' and 'professional' nor the social roles to which they refer, are as clear-cut as commonsense usage may suggest. Determining what characteristics may define an academic appears increasingly problematic (Enders 1999, 2000; Henkel 2005; Nixon et al. 2001 and Barnett 2000d, 2003). Barnett argues that ''What it is to be 'an academic' is by no means given but is a matter of dynamic relationships between social and epistemological interests and structures'' (2000d, p. 256). Despite this uncertainty, as Freisdon notes with reference to the difficulty in 'defining' profession, there must be some shared, minimum, understanding present in order to enable the referent to be ''discriminated in the empirical world'' (Freidson 1986, p. 31). As I shall suggest in a brief sociohistorical overview of the emergence of the university and the occupational role of academic (below), two distinctive responsibilities appear to be associated with the role of academic: research or scholarship, and teaching in the context of the university. In the light of this I will use as a heuristic device a working understanding of 'academics' as those persons occupying the social role that is understood to have teaching and research within the university as its core responsibilities.

Definitional certainty of the term 'profession'—at least from within the sociology of the professions—is unlikely (Popkewitz 1994; Freidson 1986; Evetts 2006a). There appear to be two significant problems that arise with respect to conceptualizing the professions.

Firstly, appeals to 'become professional', or claims to professionalism, are ideologically loaded (Popkewitz 1994; Evetts 2003a, b, 2006a). While the underlying considerations of occupational autonomy and control, and the moral values of integrity and trust may well be intended by those seeking to professionalize, the ideological agendas of state, managerial and even intra-professional hierarchies cannot be denied or ignored. Professions exist, it would appear, in the ''inside–out/outside–in'' negotiating space between the two competing agendas of the ''ecologies of practice'' (linked to intra-professional hierarchies) and the ''economies of performance'' (linked to state and managerial agendas) (Stronach et al.'s 2002, p. 121). The 'ecologies of practice' refer to the combination of shared and personal experience, the sometimes tacit ways of acting, and even the affective dispositions that people within a profession develop and which come to be labelled as professional. These tend to be dominated by those occupying the more established levels of the profession. The ecologies serve to circumscribe what it means to 'be' professional, and are 'inside out' in that they emerge from interactions within the profession and are signaled to those outside the profession. The 'economies of performance' on the other hand, are ways of construing profession from outside the profession. These latter are closely linked to performative or managerialist ways of 'measuring' what constitutes professional practice (Stronach et al. 2002). A second problem arises in the failure to recognise that the referent to which 'professional' points, is context dependant and historically changing (Freidson 1986; Popkewitz 1994). Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler capture the essence of recent sociological literature in this regard, arguing that ''traditional attempts to define professionalism, removed from the context of its practice, offer limited insight into its meaning'' (2005, p. 446). Even given these difficulties that dog any attempt to define 'profession', some way needs to be found of referring to this group of specialised occupations whose presence continues to be recognised in society.

The range of construals of 'profession' that have arisen in sociological literature are well summarised elsewhere (Friedson 1986; MacDonald 1995; Evetts 2003a, b). A brief outline of the trajectory of sociological theorising may, however, prove helpful. Professions as specialised occupation groups are by and large a Western concept. The earliest forms of profession appear to have arisen in the licensed social role of the clergy during the period of domination by the church over the state in Europe. While traceable back to the 16th Century as specialized occupations, professions really emerged as a significant social feature with the rise of capitalism and technology in the mid-19th Century (Stichweh 1997; Freidson 1986; Neal and Morgan 2000; Evetts 2004; Giesler 1994).

The sociological literature reflects shifts from broad functionalist construals (professions as a stabilizing force—1930s to 1950s) and trait theories (1950s to early 1960s), toward the focus on professional power that emerged in the writing of mostly European theorists (e.g. Foucault) in the 1960s to 1970s. Arising from this latter strand, since the 1990's the focus has shifted to understanding professions with reference to the occupational control of work (Freidson 1999; Evetts 2003b, 2006a). In particular the shift began to acknowledge the constraints of the long-standing focus on Anglo-American construals of profession, and has recently broadened to include conceptions from outside these traditions, including so-called 'developing world' conceptions. This shift has involved a shift away from construals focussed on status and power, toward a focus on the 'work' of the professional as ''knowledge-based occupations'' (Evetts 2003b, p. 396). Such a focus on occupation (work) distinguishes professional work from that under 'consumer' or 'management' control, and emphasised ''[t]he knowledge and skill [that is] embedded in the performance of productive labour as exogenous to both individual consumers and managers, who lack the knowledge and skill to perform the work of those they employ'' (Freidson 1999, p. 118).

Although acknowledging that a ‘‘shift of focus is required from a preoccupation with defining ‘profession’ to analysis of the appeal to ‘professionalism’ as a motivator for and facilitator of occupational change’’ (Evetts 2003b, p. 396), Evetts proposes a construal of profession that adopts a focus on the work of knowledge-based occupations and specifically takes into account the concept of ‘risk’ (Giddens and Beck in Evetts 2003b). In this 21st Century ‘risk society’ Evetts argues that those occupations labelled as professional are occupied with risk work and in particular with ‘‘enabling customers or clients to deal with uncertainty’’. She therefore proposes that it might be helpful to consider professions as: ‘‘…structural, occupational and institutional arrangements for dealing with work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies.’’ (Evetts 2003b, p. 397). While such a broad construal would need to be modified to include local (occupational; geohistorical) context, it may serve as a heuristic device for considering whether academe can take a place alongside the traditionally acknowledged professions such as law, medicine and (more recently) accounting. Inevitably whatever understanding is proposed has implications for the inclusion and exclusion of occupations as professions, and for the way in which the social role of the selected occupation (in this case higher education academe) will be understood.

Profession and academe: an uneasy partnership

Can we then, in the light of this heuristic, consider academe as a profession? The task is made more complex because of the historic intermeshing of higher education with the professions; a conjunction which led Piper to referring to academe as ‘‘Janus-faced’’ (Piper 1994, p. 5). Within Western traditions professions and academe have developed in symbiotic relationship, although which is ‘tenant’ and which ‘host’, and which derives benefit from which, is characteristically contested. Once again a brief socio-historical excursion may serve to highlight trends and patterns in the emergence of the professional/academic relationship.

Concomitant with the transition from ecclesiastical dominance to the emergence of state or principalities under the authority of the prince or king that began in Europe during the late 12th Century, the teacher emerged from the relative obscurity of the wandering individual ‘master’ to a formal position within the organised university community, and the first pattern of university teachers as a profession (in the sense of an occupation) emerged. During this period the nature of the academic contract shifted from the relationship with individual student as client, to the relationship with the city or state as employer (through the university). It was only towards the end of the 15th Century that significant numbers of salaried teachers began to appear. The majority of these teachers were paid by the civic authorities in whose towns the universities were established (Verger 1992a, b). Many universities were supported by civil authorities as much as to provide prestige for the city (or state), as to supply people—mostly adult offspring of nobility—trained to run the increasingly complex affairs of the city or state (Verger 1992a). It was not long before ‘‘economic development and the awakening of national sentiments made the movement for the creation of new universities more powerful’’ (Verger 1992a, p. 57).

Stichweh argues that the emergence of the range of ‘‘corporations’’ such as universities, cities and religious orders at this time was not accidental. These emergent social structures, including professions, formed ‘‘mechanisms for introducing innovation’’ into society (Stichweh 1997, p. 95). As Verger’s comment (above) suggests, such structures were not initially linked to social status, but to function within society. By the 16th Century the association of the

specialised occupations (law, medicine and the clergy) with raised social status began to emerge, although this was ''more perhaps because of the status of those who filled them than because of any deep respect for the skills and activities involved in their practice'' (Freidson 1986, p. 22). Thus two lasting characteristics of the way professions have been construed (education for service, and social status) merged.

As state control of the universities replaced religious control, university teachers were expected to provide curricula in keeping with the needs of the state (Verger 1992b; Freidson 1999; Calhoun 2006). At the same time teaching within the university became a vehicle for limited social mobility (Verger 1992b). This pattern was maintained through to the late 18th Century and beyond (Stichweh 1997; Klinge 2004).

The emergence of science as a powerful signifier of social status in the mid-19th Century appears to have had two significant impacts on academe. In the one 'scholarship' (research) increased in prominence over the traditional importance of pedagogy, and in the second, links between academe and business emerged as more important than those with princes and states (Klinge 2004). Academics, especially in the new sciences, formed mutually beneficial links with ''the world of industry and colonialism'' while those from the humanities ''merged with the political world… all of which assisted in making an academic career more attractive'' (Klinge 2004, p. 133). New professions allied to the practice of science emerged (engineering, architecture, and pharmacy), all seeking university credentials, while medicine and law entrenched their social positions. The rise of capitalism brought accountancy to the fore as a significant profession (MacDonald 1995; Neal and Morgan 2000).

Two perspectives on the rise of the professions to much greater social prominence during the 18th and 19th Century's appear to have bearing on current debates about both academics and professions. In the first, Stichweh argues that the changes noted above reflected a shift from a society founded on estates, to a society founded on ''functional differentiation'' (Stichweh 1997, p. 96). Professions emerged (and changed) to meet the new challenges provided by a society under the stress of change. Geisler offers a perspective on the 19th Century rise in social prominence of the professions that is linked to two themes more usually found in discussions of late or post-modernity (Barnett 2000d; Beck 2000): complexity and loss of trust in the current experts. Geisler argues (quoting Haskell 1977), that the motivating social force behind the mid-19th Century demand for the expansion of the professions was:

> …a reaction to the widespread failure of the classic professions to provide satisfactory advice to a society in the grip of increasing complexity. In essence, the local lawyer, doctor and priest could no longer provide citizens with enough control of their daily existence to maintain traditional authority, and new professions stepped in to fill the gap (Geisler 1994, p. 70).

In further parallels to the early 21st Century, Geisler (1994, following Haskell 1977) argues that the complexity of the mid-19th Century period of professionalization was rooted in dramatically reduced communication time allowing for the rapid spread of information (perhaps in some ways equivalent of the 21st Centuriy's information communications technology). These changes, coupled with equally dramatic urbanisation that was exacerbated by population growth and complicated by increasing concentrations of diversification of cultures of an order not before experienced, seemed to strip old ways of thinking of legitimacy. These societal shifts served to ''create the structural links between professionalism … cultural capital, educational credentials, gender segregation, and the state …'' (Savage 1992 in MacDonald 1995, p. 61). Increasingly education and certification, not prior social status, began to supply the knowledge

authority for the new professions from the beginning of the 20th Century. This led to professions increasingly turning to universities for certification for their members, and to supplying faculty members for the universities (Geisler 1994; Grub and Lazerson 2005; Tobias 2003). The roles of academic and professional within the university became increasingly blurred.

The inter-dependent relationship between university and profession has been a feature of both social structures almost from their origins. Traditionally recognised professions acted as the faculties of the universities while at the same time controlling admission to the professions through credentials (Stichweh 1997; Freidson 1999). The relationship between profession and university however, was (and arguably remains) contentious. In a debate not dissimilar to that raging around the purpose of the university at the beginning of the 21st Century (Barnett 2000c; Minogue 2005), those seeking to reform Oxford in the 1840s were split along the lines of those who wanted to reform the university to focus on ''… 'practical, professional education'…'' (Engels 1975, p. 323) and those who sought to distance the education they provided from the form of education required for a profession. Similar debates occurred in the United States (Geisler 1994; Freidson 1986). Many mid19th Century reformers of Oxford argued that it was crucial for both the survival of the university and of academe as a 'career' to recognize the profession of teaching as the central role of the academic (Engels 1975, p. 324–326). At the same time they wished to distance teaching (at Oxford at any rate) from the common assumption of teaching as a ''trade, the metaphors of business and retailing being used in regard to this activity'' (Engels 1975, p. 339). What emerged by the end of the 19th Century, was a compromise: ''The primary role of the academic man [sic] was as a teacher of subjects whose value was conceived of in terms of 'mental discipline' rather than as 'useful information''' (Engels 1975, p. 350). More recently Freidson argued that it is only by practicing as professionals (teachers) themselves that academics gain access to the material means through which ''agents of formal knowledge production'' can exist and act in society (Freidson 1986, p. 15).

> By virtue of being members of the profession of teaching that they [academics] gain the opportunity to be preoccupied with the pure, the transcendent, and the teleological, none of which are ordinarily considered to be strictly professional issues (Freidson 1986, p. 16).

Founded on what Du Toit terms a ''constitutive conception of scholarly freedom'' (Du Toit 2007, p. 3), this pragmatic combination of teacher-by-profession and scholar-by-passion in the academic social role suggested for 19th Century Oxford (Engels 1975), and recommended by Freidson (above), may well have appeared adequate in the society and university of modernity. It appears unlikely, however, to satisfy in the 21st Century (Piper 1994; Nixon et al. 1998; Taylor 1999; Barnett 2004a; Calhoun 2006).

Piper (1994) underlines the fragility of the 19th Century pragmatic solution in his examination of whether ''professors are professional'' in their role as examiners. Piper's study considers the professional status of academics only briefly as a background to considering the practice of examinations. While acknowledging that 'trait' theory in the sociology of the professions has largely been abandoned (1994, p. 2) Piper lists a range of traits ('characteristics') against which he compares the practice of academics as teachers (in which he includes examining). While some of Piper's argument is problematic (higher education is reduced to ''that activity dedicated to the preparation of people to enter … 'the professional classes'…'' 1994, p. 5), he highlights a peculiar problem in considering academe as a

profession: does the professionalism of the academic lies in the work of ‘‘derived… from the occupation for which his [sic] students are being prepared’’ (1994, p. 5). As a specialised occupation based on expert knowledge, where is the ‘knowledge’ expertise of the academic: in teaching or in the discipline content? If the answer is the latter—then there is no single ‘academic profession’ as such (for the disciplines are too diverse and divided with little shared knowledge, or even epistemological perspectives). What there is instead is a range of professions tied to disciplinary identity (Piper 1994). If it is the former, argues Piper, then a lack of ‘comprehensive training’ for higher education teaching, the lack of status accorded to academics based on their teaching qualifications or knowledge, and the fact that academics cease to be academics if they leave the university while they remain chemists or physicists, suggests that ‘academic’ still does not qualify as a ‘profession’ (1994, pp. 9, 10). Ultimately, Piper argues, while higher education academics may be professionals as members of a discipline community they do not ‘‘meet all the criteria associated with a quintessential profession…’’ (1994, p. 10 and see also pp. 234–235). Piper ends with the higher education academic as an ‘‘expert occupation’’ (1994, p. 4), who may be professional in his or her discipline fields, but (contra Freidson and the Oxford reformers) not as a teacher. Taylor reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that university teachers are by and large not professionals but ‘‘craft workers, learning to teach largely through a process of imitation’’ and that at best, university teachers are ‘‘pre-professional’’ in their capacity as teachers (Taylor following Hargreaves 1997, 1999, p. 121). Like Piper Taylor argues that it is in relation to the disciplines, as researchers (i.e. discipline experts), that academics display professional attributes (Taylor 1999).

Academic by profession?

As the above synopsis suggests reaching consensus on what constitutes the social role of ‘academic’ is not unproblematic. This is not new, although there appears to be a new urgency to the discussion of late as academics feel their independence and authority are under threat from state interventions (Henkel 2004, 2005; Beck and Young 2005). One thing about which there does appear to be consensus, is that higher education (and academe) is undergoing substantial change (Barnett 2000a–d; Beck and Young 2005; Enders 2000; Harris 2005; Henkel 2004; 2005; Nixon 2001; Makoni 2000). While the way in which this change is regarded differs, fundamental drivers appear to relate to the ‘marketization’ of knowledge, vocationalism, managerialism and state intervention (Barnett 2000d; Grub and Lazerson 2005; Olssen and Peters 2005).

The context in which academics must practice their art or craft (Taylor 1999), profession (Freidson 1986) or specialized occupation (Piper 1994), is that of higher education—most specifically, the university (Barnett 2000d). Barnett argues that we need to face up to the assessment by Readings that ‘‘the [modern] university is in ruins’’, but that we do not have to ‘‘live in the ruins’’. A new kind of university which retains some of the foundations of the old can and must be envisaged (Barnett 2000c, pp. 2–3). In the light of the growing consensus that ‘professional’ can only be understood in context, it is important to understand what this ‘new university’ can be in order to consider whether the academic can be construed as a professional in their work.

The ‘new’ university must emerge in the context of supercomplexity (Barnett 2000a, c, d). Barnett’s understanding of supercomplexity is not postmodernist in the value-laden sense of a loss of a metanarrative, but rather post-modern in the descriptive sense that this age of

supercomplexity refers to ‘‘a new world order’’ (Barnett 2000c, pp. 3–4). More than having to respond to large amounts of information or theories about the world within an agreed upon frame of reference (simple ‘complexity’), supercomplexity confronts the post-modern world, university (and the academic) with a world in which knowledge frameworks have multiplied rather than been erased (2000, p. 416). We live now in a world conscious of

> …contestability, changeability, uncertainty and unpredictability … These four concepts are surrounded by others such as change, turbulence, risk and chaos. Together, this set of concepts mark out the conceptual geography of our super-complex age as an age of fragility… It is an age in which nothing can be taken for granted. In short, all bets are off. It is an age of conceptual and, thereby, emotional, insecurity (Barnett 2000a, pp. 415–416).

Barnett argues that academe now faces a crisis of legitimacy, ‘‘[i]t is not that the clerks have lost their monopoly over the production of high status knowledge (Hauge 1991); it is that they have lost their monopoly over the definitions as to what is to count as knowledge’’ (Barnett 2000c, p. 35). This loss of control parallels the way ‘experts’ have lost monopoly over definitions of ‘risk’ through the loss of ‘‘trust in our security and belief in progress’’ (Beck 2000, p. 212). The loss of trust in the knowledge of experts and the products of expert knowledge has resulted in the expansion of ‘‘manufactured risk’’ characteristic of Beck’s ‘‘risk society’’ (Adam and Van Loon 2000, p. 2). This is not intended to suggest that supercomplexity and risk are identical. Rather risk is inherent in the uncertainty arising from the competing knowledge frameworks which constitute supercomplexity—‘‘risk is a necessary by-product of the new epistemological age’’ (Barnett 2000c, p. 43 Italics original). From this loss of certainty at the core of both risk and supercomplexity emerges the post-modern situation in which ‘‘…the individual increasingly stands alone, looking for security in the face of uncertainty…’’ (Annandale 1998, p. 19). Since the legitimacy of both expertise and knowledge, and therefore of the university, is now contested (Barnett 2000c), where does that leave the ‘new’ university and the knowledge workers who work within it? Barnett’s short response is: ‘‘attending to supercomplexity’’ (2000c, p. 168).

As I noted earlier (following Geisler 1994]), in the 19th Century similar social changes shaped by the forces of rising capitalism and burgeoning technology (albeit of an arguably different order of magnitude) shook society, including the established universities. These changes brought about a shift in the relationship between professions and academe, and served to promote a redefinition of the role of the academic (adding ‘scholarship’ to teaching in the career of the full-time academic). These changes also saw the new professionals as a structural way of supporting society in responding to the increased complexity of the age and providing ‘‘citizens with enough control of their daily existence’’ (Geisler 1994, p. 70).

Now, in the context of 21st Century society facing its own substantial epistemological upheaval in which citizens are once again seeking ‘‘enough control of their daily existence’’ Geisler’s summation of the role of the ‘modern’ profession resonates with a summation by Barnett of what the university’s responsibility to society in ‘‘attending to supercomplexity’’ may mean:

> In a context of radical uncertainty, the university becomes an institution that (i) adds directly to our uncertainty in the world (by producing imaginative and challenging new frameworks or stories by which we might understand ourselves) [i.e. research]; (ii) helps us to monitor and evaluate that uncertainty (by holding up for critical scrutiny

> the available frameworks (created in turn both within the university and across the wider society)); and (iii) enables us to live with that uncertainty, through both the operational capacities and the existential capacities that it promotes on a personal level (in its pedagogical activities) (Barnett 2004a, p. 71).

Barnett argues that academic activity is often rooted in a yearning for safety: research is often ''confined to filling in the details of dominant research paradigms…. In teaching, again, relatively safe pedagogic methods are chosen that give both lecturer and student an easy time: they fail systematically to promote self-reliance…'' (2000c, p. 170). What is needed of the university in the age of supercomplexity is research (which is predicated on a disciplinary base) that is transdisciplinary in its engagement with others both within and outside the university. ''New frameworks of knowledge have to be not only produced in-house but also made available for consumption in the wider society'' (Barnett 2000c, p. 170). Research must support the social engagement of the university ''…in expanding the frames of understanding in the wider world and in assisting their assimilation'' (Barnett 2000c, p. 170). Within our pedagogy, argues Barnett, there must be a shift from an epistemological to an ontological focus: ''The student's being has to take centre stage. Feeling uncertainty, responding to uncertainty, gaining confidence to insert oneself amid the numerous counter-claims to which one is exposed … these are matters of being'' (Barnett 2000c, pp. 170–171).

Barnett's arguments resonate with the proposals for re-visioning academic freedom as a basis for academic professionality/-ism, argued for (separately) by Nixon (Nixon et al. 1998; Nixon 2001) and Du Toit (2001). Nixon argues that traditional notions of academic freedom on which defences of academic professionalism are frequently based, are notions of freedom that ''has been less concerned with free speech than in professional autonomy and collegial self-governance: the freedom of individual academics to pursue academic activities in academic settings in a manner and to an end of their own choosing'' (Nixon et al. 1998: HTML Document). Such a basis for academic freedom, and therefore for academic profession, is both unsustainable and inappropriate for the kind of higher education context emerging at the beginning of the 21st Century:

> What is needed is a new academic professionalism based upon a more generous and expansive notion of academic freedom as freedom for others: the responsibility of academics to ensure that others have the responsibility to speak their own minds, to learn in accordance with their own interests, and to enjoy a secure framework within which to learn (Nixon et al. 1998: HTML Document).

Du Toit's summation, while similar, has a different nuance:

> In this view, academic freedom is not conceived negatively in terms of individual and institutional rights and protection against external interference (by the state, the public or even university administrators); rather it is conceived positively in terms of empowering viable intellectual discourse communities, both within the university, and that are also able to reach out, engage with and give accounts of themselves to wider communities, society and the state more generally (Du Toit 2001, p. 9).

Both of these calls for a re-conceptualization of 'academic freedom' as the basis for academic profession could support the construal of the role of the academic implicit in Barnett's argument for the social role of the 'new' university (2000c, 2004a above). They point to an academe committed to enabling people to live with the uncertainties of conflicting frameworks,

to hold 'up for critical scrutiny the available frameworks', and to engage in 'producing imaginative and challenging new frameworks or stories by which we might understand ourselves' (Barnett 2004a, above).

This construal of the social role of the university and the academic in the 21st Century echoes Evetts' proposal that professions could be categorized as structural, occupational and institutional arrangements for dealing with work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies (2003b, p. 397, above). To borrow from Evetts' proposal regarding professions, academics by virtue of their occupation, are intimately involved in dealing with work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies. [Academics are also] extensively engaged in dealing with risk, with risk assessment and, through the use of [disciplinary knowledges], enabling [students and society] to live with uncertainty.

For consideration

'Conclusion' is too strong a position, hence the above sub-title. In that vein, I would suggest that if academe is to remain with trait-based or function-based self-understandings of profession that seek to represent professions as modernist bastions of value and stability in society, or as sources of sound expert knowledge, and academics as discipline experts who teach (Freidson 1986, 1999) then I agree with Piper (1994) and Taylor (1999) that academe qua academe is no longer sustainable as a profession. If however academics can accept Evetts' proposal that professions are indeed structural arrangements that emerge from the relations between society and individuals for enabling [students] and society to live with uncertainty, then I would argue that academe may be regarded as a profession within the 'new' university (Barnett 2000c).

Such a choice requires each academic to become a ''Social Actor who … [chooses] … to identify him or herself with a particular role [that of enabling students and society to live with uncertainty] and actively personify it in a particularistic way'' (Archer 2000, p. 284). I am, however, not certain that academics have made a choice as too whether to be part of ''A university for supercomplexity… [which is] one in incessant turmoil, where all the basic assumptions as to one's self-identity as researcher, scholar and teacher are kept perpetually in the air…'' (Barnett 2000c, p. 172). Nor am I certain whether academics have made a commitment to reconsidering our understanding of academic freedom as a freedom for society along the lines proposed by Du Toit (2001); until then, academe remains an uncertain profession.

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