

Academic Teachers' Professional Identity in Poland in the Period of Changes

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Abstract

Against the background of a brief overview of the most important changes in higher education in Poland, which significantly influenced the position of academic teachers, we have made an attempt to answer the question pertaining to the ideas and preferences academic teachers associated with their profession in this difficult time have. The research was based on the selected results of the survey of the professional identity of academic teachers at the Poznań University of Economics and Business (PUE&B) in 2013. We compared the teachers' beliefs concerning the main role of a university and their declared preferences regarding their professional role according to the position at the university. The results reveal signs of crisis of professional identity of academic teachers, which affects the ability to meet the expectations of students in economics and business.

Keywords: Professional identity of academic teachers, Teachers' roles, Task of higher education

Introduction

The basic professional roles of the academic teacher- a researcher, a teacher and an educator, connected with the essence and history of the university, constitute the basis of professional identity (Jaskot & Jazukiewicz, 2006). However, the development of professional identity is a lot more complex. As Clarke, Hyde & Drennan (2013) conclude, in the light of previous studies, identity is shaped at an early stage of one's professional career through personal characteristics, prior socialisation experiences and organisational context. What also plays a part here are the issues of gender differences and blurred borderlines between the university and other spheres of life. There are also differences in identity at different stages of a professional career. Changes in higher education have entailed a lot of new duties and changes in the characteristics of job positions, which leads to differences in the perception of professional identity (Clarke et al. 2013). According to Ylioki (2005), these changes all over the world cause university teachers' nostalgia for lost autonomy and academic freedom. It is reflected in their pursuit for unhindered research work and daily pressure to make a scientific career by routinely publishing articles and in education subject to the expectations and evaluation of students (Ylioki 2005).

In Poland, university professors enjoy high (82%) social trust (Wiadomości z Lublina, 2014), but academic teachers generally feel that their profession has become less prestigious in recent years. They link it with the situation in higher education: low remuneration, the need for seeking additional sources of income and the massification of education, which means teaching low ability students, who often have little motivation to study. As a result, academic teachers adapt to these new circumstances in a different way. The aim of this paper is to identify the selected aspects of university teachers' professional identity, taking into consideration their gender and position in the academic hierarchy. To this end, we used the results of the study of academic teachers conducted at the Poznan University of Economics in 2013.

The Professional Identity of Academic Teachers

Identity is a set of subjective meanings that individuals attribute to themselves in seeking the answer to the question "who am I?" These meanings are born in processes of social interaction and are subject to dynamic changes that occur between the individual and the social structure (Brown, 2015; Beech 2008). The notion of professional identity is connected with a relatively permanent set of attributes, beliefs, values and experiences which are used for identifying oneself with reference to one's professional roles (Ibarra 1999). Identity should refer both to the community and to the individual. Kogan (2000) believes that the individual plays roles that are strongly determined by a group he or she belongs to. According to Bokszański (2006), collective identity is a manifestation of the community that recognises the specific cultural values of the group as the ones that differentiate this group from others. At present, the shaping of identity is defined as a process that requires interpreting and reinterpreting of one's experiences. It means that people – influenced by self-evaluation – constantly form their identity in time (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000).

Professional identity determines the attitude to professional roles. That is why one of the key issues for each academic teacher is the perception of his or her own professional role, which impacts his or her professional attitude to work (Kogan 2000). The profession of an academic teacher has at least dual nature: on one hand, a researcher that focuses on scientific work; on the other hand, a teacher – a person that shares his or her knowledge with students. As Whitchurch notes (2008), some people are successful in combining the two areas harmoniously, but others

focus on just one of them. Apart from these basic roles in the contemporary university there are also many others (such as a scientific entrepreneur, a public expert, etc.). That is why Whitchurch (2008) argues that in modern higher education there is an ongoing process of shaping professional roles in the project way, i.e. academics build their professionalism not only on the basis of their personal qualities, but they also take advantage of relations with their colleagues both from and from outside university. As a matter of fact, different types of blended professionals emerge – people, who go beyond the established barriers and give a new meaning to the identity of professional teachers.

Changes in Higher Education Which Implicate the Position of Academic Teachers

In knowledge-based, innovative economy, the role of higher education is more important than ever. On the other hand, it is no longer considered to be a privileged sector. Some changes in higher education have universal character. The literature emphasises the intensification of work at university, which requires subordination to new roles and which increases stress and makes it difficult to reconcile a professional career with family life (Harman, 2003; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007; Shattock, 2000). There is growing pressure on measuring performance and on financing higher education institutions based on the obtained parameters, which leads to enhanced competition among universities and their employees for public funds (Carnoy, 1999; Kwiek, 2003; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). The scope of rivalry has significantly increased as it currently involves applicants for university and academics (Popławski, Markowski & Florkiewicz, 2013). The model of a research university has also ceased to be the dominant one, being gradually replaced by an entrepreneurial university. The activity of the university is becoming increasingly similar to that of the corporation (Clark, 1989; Józwiak & Morawski 2009; Shattock, 2000). At present, it is proposed that a third generation university should be built: the one which, apart from conducting research and teaching students, will fulfil the third function – the commercialisation of research and technology (Wissemma, 2005).

Higher education in Poland has undergone deep changes since the beginning of the 1990s. They are connected with the introduction of new legal regulations concerning the functioning of the university and the profession of an academic teacher (the introduction of competition among state and private schools, principles of professional promotion, rules concerning the financing of activity). They are the result of integration processes in the European Higher Education Area (three cycles of higher education qualifications, national qualifications framework, internationalisation) and of social and economic changes in the country (the mass scale of studies, graduates finding it hard to find employment, employers' expectations). All these circumstances are intertwined and influence each other, making the work environment of an academic teacher significantly different than the one that a large number of current employees remember.

A change of a university model resulting in a new way of gaining resources for scientific research accompanied by the introduction of quite restrictive measures concerning the employment of academic teachers at universities and high requirements as regards obtaining scientific degrees and titles determine a weaker professional position of academic teachers. They have to become more entrepreneurial as even a very good paper published in a journal with a low score base does not significantly improve their scientific achievements, which are the basis for winning higher professional degrees, titles and positions. Low activity in seeking grants and the lack of international contacts bring similar effects. Thus, growing pressure on obtaining tangible

results in scientific work has decreased job security and increased competition among staff, as a pool of resources for research work has basically remained at the same level.

Changes in teaching are equally important. They are to a certain degree connected with the massification of education, which – in the current demographic situation – means lower initial requirements for applicants for university rather than an increase in the number of students. As a result, students largely differ in terms of ability, knowledge, skills and motivation. A lot of them do not exhibit high academic ambitions, but pragmatically aim to gain qualifications that will help them find a decent job (Andrzejczak, 2012). The situation is additionally complicated by the possibility of pursuing Master studies in a different field than one has studied at the Bachelor level. In practice, it means a considerable increase in the requirements regarding the teaching competences of academics, who should change their attitude and methodology of work with different groups of students. Previous teaching methods, which proved successful when it came to ambitious and talented students, appear to be insufficient in the case of consumption-oriented students. What is more, the internationalisation of studies, which entails teaching international groups, means more requirements for teachers. All this is accompanied by the reduction of teaching hours, the predominance of lectures and a lack of reward for teachers' additional effort. What poses another problem is poor attendance of students at non-compulsory classes, because of their engagement in own gainful employment. It means extra work for the academic teacher, who has to provide students with the conditions for passing the subject.

The most significant changes in higher education in Poland discussed above have considerably affected the position of academic teachers. At university, it is dependent on their entrepreneurial attitude when it comes to seeking resources for scientific research, progress in this research, and “selling” the obtained results. At the same time, they are required to teach a specific number of class hours regardless of their involvement in other activities. This means a dilemma concerning the proportion of the division of time and priority goals.

Methodology

We undertook to at least partially identify the professional identity of academic teachers at the economic university in the new circumstances of the higher education in Poland. The research was conducted with the application of a survey questionnaire for academic teachers and doctoral students of the University of Economics and Business in Poznan. Its goal was to recognise professional identity in the context of balance between scientific, teaching and organisational work¹. In this paper, we focused on the selected issues connected with professional identity and its diversity depending on the position taken by academic teachers in the university hierarchy and gender. We took into consideration beliefs concerning the university's mission and declared preferences regarding one's professional role.

¹ The survey was conducted among the academic staff of the university (at all faculties and among all groups of academics, as well as among doctoral students). Doctoral students were included in the survey since in Poland they are obliged to teach and participate in university life on terms very similar to assistants. Altogether, 235 people filled in questionnaires. The study was carried out in the academic year 2013/14.

The Professional Identity of Academic Teachers at an Economic University

Academic teachers' attitude to their professional roles results, among other things, from the perception of the role of economic education, the university's mission, and basic tasks of academics. The employees under survey differ in their opinion on what the most important objective of economic education is (see Table 1). Survey questions required to express their preference between "labour market" or "intellectual" orientation of education. The dominant view is that the principal task of economic education is to educate staff for economy (55%), while 45% of the respondents believe that it is the development of the intellectual elite that is the most important goal. The opinions on what the basic task of the university is are more varied. 66% of the teachers under survey indicated the intellectual development of students and broadening their horizons as the most important, while 34% pointed at preparation in line with the current needs of the labour market. This seeming discrepancy in both issues is the result, as one might guess, from the lack of approval for limiting oneself to the present needs of the job market. Moreover, economic education should be defined in broader terms, as extracurricular and informal forms of education. What is of the biggest importance, however, is the recognition of the principal task of academic teachers. The slight majority of the respondents (51%) were of the opinion that educating students and developing their professional competences is more important than inspiring them to develop themselves (49%). The obtained results show that the perception of one's professional role is not consistent with the university mission. On one hand the traditional values of the culture-forming and elite-forming role of the university remain to be relevant; on the other hand, the pressure of the labour market appears. It is obvious that both these roles are important for the contemporary university, but the declarations of the surveyed teachers lacked consistency and agreement as to which of these tasks is more important.

A degree to which one is convinced about the usefulness of studies depends on gender and the position one occupies (see Table 1). There is a relatively strong agreement when it comes to the tasks of economic education. Most university teachers attached the same importance to educating staff for economy and to developing country elites. It was only among full professors, as well as among doctoral students, that the preparation of staff for economy was deemed the main goal of economic education. Men were of a different opinion on this matter, finding the development of the intellectual elite a slightly more important objective. As far as the main tasks of the university and its teachers are concerned, the elite-forming role of the university and the teacher's role in inspiring students to develop themselves were clearly emphasised, especially among professors. This view is shared by all groups of teachers, although to a different extent. What is interesting is the fact that the most numerous groups of teachers and doctoral students perceive the role of the academic teacher in a different way than professors. Junior employees mostly perceive their role as those who equip students with knowledge and professional competences. On the basis of data in table 1, we may observe that the opinions of particular groups do not only differ, but they are also quite inconsistent, which reveals the essence of the conflict identified earlier. Younger employees, although to a different degree, are oriented more towards education based on the needs of the labour market. Most professors are attached to the traditional, developmental roles of the academic teacher and university. What attracts attention is the dissonance between the way in which the most numerous group of assistant lecturers, assistant professors and lecturers perceive the role of economic studies and their own tasks. 71% of them give priority to the intellectual development of students, while only 48% of them find it their own most important task. The youngest group of doctoral students makes more consistent choices in this matter. The differences in terms of gender discussed above appeared to be

statistically insignificant. As far as the position held at university is concerned, it was only the differences related to the role of economic studies and the academic teacher that proved to be statistically significant.

Tasks of economic education, university and teachers	Principal task of economic education		Principal task of economic studies		Principal task of university teacher	
	Educating staff for economy, in line with the current and future needs of the labour market	Developing the intellectual elite of the country	Preparing students in line with the current and future needs of the labour market	Intellectual development and broadening horizons	Developing students' skills and professional competences	Inspiring students to develop themselves
Academic teachers altogether, including:	55	45	34	66	51	49
Women	60	40	32	68	59	41
Men	48	52	36	64	45	55
Doctoral students	61	39	50	50	61	39
Assistant lecturers, assistant professors, lecturers	50	50	29	71	52	48
PUE&B professors	50	50	21	79	36	64
Full professors	67	33	8	92	18	82

Table 1. The priority tasks of the economic university according to academic teachers taking into consideration their gender and position held at university (w%)

Source: author's own work based on the results of the study conducted at the Department of Education and Personnel Development, 2013/14

The next step was to identify the self-identity of academic teachers regarding their own professional roles. We used the concept of three spheres of teachers' activity: the research (subject matter), teaching and pedagogical expert (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000). The respondents had to distribute 100 points among these spheres. They attached definitely the greatest importance to the way of working with students in which a teacher has to base on his or her own knowledge, skills and experience related to the field of study he or she represents (47 points on average). Then, the respondents perceived themselves as teachers who make use of their teaching competences – including the skills of planning, conducting and evaluating the teaching process – during classes (31 points on average). The role of a pedagogical expert – who

supports the social, emotional and moral development of students - was given the lowest score (22 points on average).

Category of academic teachers	Research expert	Teaching expert	Pedagogical expert
Total:	47	31	22
Women	48	30	22
Men	45	32	23
Doctoral students	44	33	22
Assistant lecturers, assistant professors, lecturers	46	32	22
Assistant professors	50	27	22
Full professors	51	26	23

Table 2. The average number of points given to the professional roles of academic teachers taking into consideration their gender and position at university

Source: author's own work based on the results of the study conducted at the Department of Education and Personnel Development, 2013/14

The distribution of answers to the above questions (see: table 2) differs only slightly as regards gender and in particular groups of teachers. It is primarily professors that see themselves as research experts, followed by assistant professors and lecturers, while doctoral students are more critical of themselves (although they still gave the highest number of points to this role). This relationship is statistically significant ($F=3.25$; $df=4$, $p<0.01$). We observe the opposite situation when it comes to perceiving oneself as an expert who is able to plan and conduct classes, and then evaluate the effects. In this respect, doctoral students feel more confident than professors, although no statistically significant relationship was found here. There are no differences when it comes to the role of a pedagogical expert, who has knowledge and skills to support students in their social, emotional and moral development. This aspect of the university teacher's work was seen as the least relevant one.

		Research expert	Teaching expert	Pedagogical expert
Research expert	Pearson correlation	1	-,687**	-,602**
	Significance (bilateral)		,000	,000
Teaching expert	Pearson correlation	-,687**	1	-,158*
	Significance (bilateral)	,000		,016
Pedagogical expert	Pearson correlation	-,602**	-,158*	1
	Significance (bilateral)	,000	,016	

Table 3. Correlations of aspects of university teachers' professional identity

** . Significant correlation at level 0.01 (bilaterally).

* . Significant correlation at level 0.05 (bilaterally).

Source: author's own work based on the results of the study conducted at the Department of Education and Personnel Development, 2013/14.

Table 3 presents coefficients of correlation between the discussed roles. It clearly shows that one's perception as a research expert is strongly and negatively correlated with one's identification as a teacher and an educator. There is no link between the two latter aspects of identity. The results included in the table indicate that university teachers primarily see themselves as scientists. This means that they focus their attention, time and energy on becoming a research expert at the expense of the teaching or educational aspect. This conclusion is confirmed by the answers to other questions connected with the kind of competences used during classes. In their work with students, 86% of teachers depend on their knowledge of the scientific field. 83% of them apply teaching knowledge, based on best teaching practices, but only 20% feel very good in this respect. The lowest number of teachers, i.e. 49%, rely on their knowledge of motives, ways of learning, and expectations of students, but only 12% of teachers are deeply convinced they do it properly. A high percentage of teachers, i.e. 19%, admit that they do not have knowledge in this sphere at all. The respondents did not show interest in improving their teaching (relevant for 40%) and pedagogical competences (important for 28%).

Discussion and Conclusions

As one might guess, in accordance with trends shown in the literature, changes in higher education in Poland have led to a certain crisis of the professional identity of academic teachers. It manifests itself in the contradiction in the perception of one's professional role against the background of the university's mission. Mean values which represent the total number of the teachers under survey show that the most important goal of economic studies is the intellectual development and broadening horizons of students, but the university teacher's main task is to develop professional competences. This inconsistency results from a clash between two visions of the university, and strictly speaking, from the gradual reduction of its elite-forming role. The observed contradiction in declarations is even more evident if we take into consideration the distribution of opinions in the particular groups of university teachers. Professors constitute a group that is the most strongly attached to traditional academic values, but also among them lack of consistency in their opinions is observed. It is reflected by a clear difference in the opinions

between PUE&B (junior) and full (senior) professors. In general, the lower the position in the university hierarchy is, the bigger importance is attached to focusing education on the needs of the labour market.

What is an important indicator of professional identity is the significance attributed to professional roles, defined on the basis of the leading application of one's competences. The obtained results clearly show that academic teachers primarily perceive themselves as research experts. In other words, they view themselves as scientists who apply knowledge in a given field during classes. The higher the position in the university hierarchy is, the deeper this feeling becomes. The teachers under survey to a lesser degree identified themselves as teaching experts. It should be emphasised that younger teachers attached more importance to the skill of designing and conducting classes in an interesting way. All groups of teachers found the role of a pedagogical expert, who takes care of the development of students, the least significant. One might assume that this is the main cause of a discrepancy between the perception of the role of the academic teacher and the way of teaching classes consistent with students' expectations. On one hand, it reveals contradictions in teachers' declarations concerning the perception of the university's role, one's own role and actual behaviour. How can one develop students intellectually and broaden their horizons, which was declared as the main goal of economic studies and of the teacher, with such evident depreciation of educational knowledge? On the other hand, the underestimation of knowledge related to the support for students' development and the excessive input of theoretical knowledge of a given field during classes contributes to the low quality of teaching and makes it difficult to meet students' expectations.

The problem addressed in the paper is definitely more complex than we have shown here. It is obvious that both education of staff for the labour market and the intellectual development of students are important for the contemporary economic university. The observed problem of professional identity manifested itself in the lack of consistency in teachers' declarations of which of these tasks they find more important and what measures should be taken to perform them. The research revealed that the youngest group of teachers, i.e. doctoral students, express quite different opinions. Their declarations concerning the mission of the economic university and of the academic teacher showed that the highest consistency and priority was given to meeting the needs of the labour market. Representatives of this group also highly assessed their role as a teaching expert, which may be the result of the availability of a teaching course they participated in. Young university teachers of the new generation, when creating their professional identity, find the practical aspect of economic studies more important than the academic value of the programme of these studies.

Our study is not free of faults. They result from, for example, the simplified concept of professional identity, which distinguishes only three dimensions of the profession of an academic teacher (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt 2000). At present, the job of a university teacher involves having to deal with many other problems and dilemmas, which will probably impact the process of the shaping of professional identity. For example, we took no account of the issue of the transfer of scientific knowledge, performing a role of economic experts and a number of other problems, such as the issue of finding the balance between family life and professional activity.

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