

Chapter 6

The South African Academic Profession: Personal Characteristics, Career Trajectories, Identities and Sense of Commitment

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6.1 Introduction

The scientific study of higher education is a recent phenomenon (*cf.* Altbach 1985; Bitzer and Wilkinson 2012). The field became visible only well into the second half of the twentieth century (*cf.* Brennan and Teichler 2008). Research on the academic profession is an even a more recent activity. Even around 1990, the academic profession was not a prevalent theme in higher education research (*cf.* Wolhuter 1997, p. 38). It rose to prominence with the Carnegie international survey of the academic profession during the early 1990s (*cf.* Altbach 1996).

South Africa is no exception to the worldwide pattern (*cf.* Wolhuter 1997). Whatever attention has been paid initially to the academic profession as a focus of research, revolved around the profession's research and teaching activities, and relations with institutional governance. Aspects of their lives such as their personal and social characteristics, their career trajectories, identities and sense of commitment – all impacting significantly on their functioning as teachers and as researchers – have been ignored. The aim of this paper is to fill that hiatus.

The paper commences with a depiction of the contextual background in which the South African academic profession functions. That is followed by an explanation of the methodology: The Changing Academic Profession (CAP) project and its collection of data. The South African academic profession's personal characteristics, career trajectories, identity, and commitment, as emanating from the CAP exercise are then presented. In conclusion, these are then related to their context, and the implications for the fulfillment of their role as academics are spelled out.

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6.2 Contextual Background

6.2.1 *International Level*

The South African academic profession finds itself at the receiving end of a flood of changes at international, national and institutional levels, and with respect to the changing structure of knowledge. Two solvent forces, international in scope, are affecting the South African academic profession (as they affect their counterparts in other countries too). Firstly the technological, electronic and communications revolution greatly facilitates the internationalization of universities and of the academic profession, as this revolution makes easier travel, mobility, interaction and collaboration (*cf.* Altbach et al. 2009).

Secondly the neo-liberal economic revolution has made its impact felt on higher education too. The principles of the neo-liberal economy (the profit-motive, efficiency, performativity, reducing the human to a production and consumption unit) were carried into the institutions of higher education. The state, as main supplier of finance for higher education institutions, demands accountability from such institutions and proclaims an ever bigger say in the activities of such institutions. An entire range of quality assurance mechanisms has been put in place.

In South Africa, these changes made their impact felt as well. With respect to the second – the corporatization of the university culture – the difference between South Africa and the rest of the world is that South Africa was shielded from them as one (unintended) result of the international academic boycott waged against the country till 1990 (*cf.* Harricombe and Lancaster 1995); after 1990 the changes came down much more rapidly and forcefully in South Africa than in the rest of the world, where they had started to build up much earlier, and happened more gradually over a longer period of time (*cf.* Jansen 2004; Bundy 2005).

6.2.2 *National Level*

Upon assuming power in 1994, with the dawn of a new socio-political dispensation, the ruling party (ANC – African National Congress), embarked on an ambitious societal reconstruction project, of which education was not only part, but in which education was also assigned a pivotal role to bring about the desired societal transformation. In the first years after 1994, the ANC formulated a new education policy, based upon the following principles: equalization of educational opportunities, desegregation, multiculturalism and democratization (Wolhuter 1999). As these principles in many respects represent the polar opposites of the bequeathed (pre-1994) education system, they prescribed a radical change for education in South Africa. The policy of equal educational opportunity meant that universities had to gear themselves for a surge in Black student enrolment after 1994. Till 1994

Blacks were disproportionately underrepresented at universities. A problem was that Black primary and secondary schools in the pre-1994 era offered the worst quality education in South Africa (cf. Reschovsky 2006). The new policy therefore meant a surge of Black students from schools which ill-prepared them for university study (cf. Odendaal and Deacon 2009).

The 'Higher Education Act' ('Act 101 of 1997') gave the Minister of Education sweeping powers over institutions of higher education, including universities; and represents a radical break with the past, when universities were largely in charge of their own affairs.

6.2.3 Institutional Level

Under the influence of the global and national changes outlined above, changes occur within universities, which resulted in academics experiencing that their autonomy and prestige are fizzling out from three increasingly demanding sources: the student body, university governance and national governance.

Equalization of education opportunities meant an influx of students, many of which are, as explained above, very poorly prepared for university study, due to poor quality primary and secondary education. Secondly, in the spirit of democratization, students are gaining even more say in the running of universities, including the appointment of academic staff.

Running universities according to business principles, institutional governance is getting more and more prescriptive, and academics are operating in an environment of increasing managerialism.

The traditional power-base and historically almost untouchable power base of academics is being further eroded from a third source, namely national government. Government, as the largest funder of higher education, demands more accountability from universities (cf. Van der Walt et al. 2010). Since 1994 a statutory body, the Higher Education Quality Committee was set up to carry out on-site quality assurance audits of programs offered at universities. These audits involve laborious preparation of documentation by academics. The National Qualifications Framework, which was set up after 1994, too requires a lengthy and time-consuming documentation.

6.2.4 Changes in the Structure of Knowledge

South African universities were traditionally very much 'ivory tower' institutions. The various disciplines were studied in departments, which were the basic units of the academic enterprise. Academics were encapsulated in these departments, very much isolated from academics in other departments and from the realities of the outside world.

The introduction of a National Qualifications Framework represents one post-1994 force forcing academics to restructure and to rebuild their programmes oriented to (predominantly practical outcomes, rather than by using the traditional disciplines as building blocks). The total change of the education system from content-based education to outcomes-based education constitutes a second strong force in the same direction. Training in most professions, such as law, the ministry, architecture and the teaching profession, has changed from a bachelors degree in the basic faculties (humanities or natural sciences) followed by a few years' study in professional faculties (law, medicine, theology, education, etc.) to the entire programme being appropriated by the professional faculties. This means that courses in basic disciplines (sociology, history, psychology, etc.) are excluded from the training for the professions – now built around professional skills.

All these developments are in line with a global shift in the production and organization of knowledge. Gibbons (2003) named this a shift from Mode 1 (traditional, discipline-bound) to Mode 2 knowledge, i.e. knowledge are now provided and organized on utilitarian and practical grounds.

6.3 Research Method

The academic profession of South Africa was surveyed as part of the international CAP (The Changing Academic Profession) project. Academics in almost 20 countries were surveyed by means of a by and large uniform questionnaire. The questionnaire addressed the following aspects of the academic profession: biographic particulars, teaching activities, research activities, international profile, their relations with institutional governance, and their relations with society.

Participating in the CAP project, the authors surveyed a representative sample of the South African academic profession. Eight hundred South African academics completed the questionnaire. The South African researchers who took part in the CAP project (i.e. the authors of this chapter) solicit permission from all 24 universities and one national institution of research to approach their academic personnel with the request to complete the survey. All but two of these institutions gave permission. Subsequently the authors asked a colleague at each institution to serve as contact person. Each of these contact persons contracted a student assistant who went from door to door to the academic staff of the institutions. The academics were given a copy of the questionnaire as well as a letter explaining the purpose of the research and were asked to complete the questionnaire. After a week the assistant went back to the academics and collected completed questionnaires. They handed over the completed questionnaires to the contact person on the campus, who mailed it back to the CAP research team.

The CAP survey is but the second international survey of the academic profession. The first survey was the Carnegie Investigation in the early 1990s (see Altbach 1996). As South Africa was at that stage still subjected to the international academic boycott, South Africa did not participate in that survey. In 2002/3, however, two

South African academics, with the approval and encouragement of the principals of the Carnegie investigation, applied the questionnaire to a sample of the South African academic profession (*cf.* Wolhuter et al. 2006). This provides the opportunity to detect shifts in the South African academic profession up to 4 years later, when the CAP survey was undertaken.

6.4 Findings

6.4.1 *Personal Characteristics*

Fifty three percent of respondents were male and 47 % female. This comes close to national aggregate figures (52 % male, 48 % female) and shows that the sample could be regarded as representative. The South African academic profession is highly feminized. It is difficult to decide whether this is a visible outcome of vigorous policies of equality and affirmative action prescribed by government and followed by universities and an indication of an adrogenous society taking shape, or an indication of how the academic profession has lost its attractiveness, and that the high percentage female academics is a sign that the academic profession is no longer very prestigious and sought.

To put matters into perspective three publications need to be cited. Analysing the results of the 2002/3 survey following the Carnegie model, Higgs et al. (2004) found little difference between male and female South African academics, on a wide front, i.e. teaching activities, research activities, teaching-research preferences, community service, relations with institutional management, relations with national government, education-society relations and job satisfaction. The only significant differences were with regard to experience and academic rank. Female academics tended to be concentrated in the lower academic ranks, and had, on average, less years of experience in higher education than their male counterparts.

Secondly, two recent publications (Van der Walt et al. 2009, and Wolhuter et al. 2010) concluded that the academic profession is, compared to other professions in South Africa, no longer a very attractive career option. On the contrary, many academics seem to lead relatively unfulfilled professional lives.

According to the CAP survey, the average respondent in South Africa was 47 years of age. About one third were up to 40 years old, more than half were in their 40s and 50s, while few were elder than 60 years (see Table 6.1).

According to the CAP survey, the South African academic profession is not a young profession. The Survey applied 5 years earlier found the average age to be 43 years (43.6 years for male and 43.2 years for female academics) (Wolhuter and Higgs 2006). Thus, the average age seems to have increased 4 years in 5 years. This confirms the allegation frequently made that the South African academic profession is a rapidly ageing profession. As the compulsory retirement age of faculty is 60 or 65, the profession in South Africa is heading for serious trouble in the next 10–15 years when the majority of faculty (most of them senior, experience faculty, and

Table 6.1 Age composition of South African academics (percentages)

Age group	Responses
Under 30 years	11
31–35 years	10
36–40 years	13
41–45 years	14
46–50 years	18
51–55 years	15
56–60 years	11
61–65 years	7
Older than 65 years	1

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

Table 6.2 Conjugal status of South African academics (percentages)

Category	Responses
Married/partner	75
Single	22
Other	3

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

Table 6.3 Employment status of spouses of South African academics (percentage of respondents being married/having a partner)

Answer	Responses
Yes, full time	72
Yes, part time	1
No	28

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

productive researchers) will exit from the profession. Employment after 65, although not unheard of, only takes place in terms of part-time or fixed term unemployment and only in cases where university policy makes provision for such appointments. Even where possible in terms of university policy, deans and middle level management widely frown upon and eschew such appointments, and they always take place at remuneration levels substantially lower than that of full time employed faculty.

The conjugal statuses of respondents are presented in Table 6.2. These figures show that the majority of academics are part of a family structure.

Respondents were also asked if their spouses/partners are employed. The fact shown in Table 6.3 that the majority of academics have spouses also standing in full time suggests that most academics do have roles within families and responsibilities towards other family members and that these need to be taken into account when interpreting the results of the CAP survey.

Respondents were asked as to the education level of their parents and the parents of their spouses/partners (see Table 6.4). The high level of education of parents and spouses, in a country with low tertiary enrolment ratios, points to a fairly rigid and -impenetrable socio-economic stratification system leaving little opportunity for education to serve as a vehicle for upward social mobility.

Table 6.4 Highest education level of parents and spouse/partner of South Africa academics (percentages)

Highest education level	Father	Mother	Spouse/partner
Entered and completed tertiary education	45	35	85
Entered and/or completed secondary education	31	42	11
Entered and/or completed primary education	14	13	1
No formal education	6	8	1
Not applicable	4	3	1

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

This is confirmed by the fact that 33 % of the academics with a spouse/partner report that the partner is an academic. This a further indication for the closed nature of South African society and its relatively strongly fossilized socio-economic borderlines that are difficult to cross.

The majority of respondents have children living with them: 20 % one child, 24 % two children and 15 % three children. Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that they have at one stage interrupted employment to provide child or elder care at home. Of those who did so, they have done so far an average of 14.4 years. The typical academic then, as could be expected from someone 47 years old, is married, with his/her children having already left home. The majority still have children living with them in house, once again reinforcing the conclusion reached above as to the average South African academic finding him/herself in a situation of a family, with its attending roles and responsibilities.

Ninety one percent respondents were born in South Africa, and 93 % received their first degree in South Africa. These figures point to a low level of internationalization as far as faculty composition is concerned, and point to the high levels of pernicious in-breeding – a malady of South African academe. For some of the senior part of the profession (those who got their PhDs before 1994) this still reflects the effect of the international academic boycott. Other than that, the peripheral location of the country, far from the centre of the international academic world, Western-Europe and North-America, can also partly explain the low levels of internationalization.

Sixty two of respondents reported their first language as Afrikaans and 16 % English – i.e. a stunning 78 % reported Afrikaans or English as their first languages. Nationally Afrikaans and English are the home language of respectively 13.3 % and 8.2 % of the population. These statistics point to the continuing dominance of White South Africans in the academic profession, despite two decades of vigorous affirmative action policies, with respect to the appointment and promotion of academic staff. In the White community the Afrikaans speaking section has historically dominated the education and civil service sectors, and the English speaking sector business and industry. Most of the historically Black universities came into being in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Because Black South Africans with tertiary education qualifications, especially with Doctorates and Masters degrees, were very rare at that stage, even at the historically Black universities (*cf.* Behr 1988; Christie 1991).

Table 6.5 South African academics' full-time and part-time employment since the first degree in the various sectors of the economy (mean years)

Employer	Responses	
	Full time	Part time
Higher education institutions	12.8	4.1
Government/public sector institutions	3.2	1.1
Industry/private sector institutions	0.9	0.6
Self-employed	0.4	0.5

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

6.4.2 Career Trajectories

Respondents were asked about their employment history since their first degrees. As Table 6.5 shows, they reported altogether 17.3 years of full-time employment and 6.3 years of part-time employment. Thereby, they were employed on average more than two-third of that time at higher education institutions as well as quite some in government or public sector institutions, while industry or private sector institutions, and self-employment were less frequent.

On average, the South African academics had been employed at 2.1 higher education institutions. At their current rank, they had been employed at the time of the survey for about 6 years.

At the time of the survey, 91 % of respondents had full-time contracts, 5 % part-time, and 3 % were paid for part-time work according to work tasks. Eighty one percent were permanently employed (tenure), and 4 % were continuously employed with no guarantee of permanence. Eight percent reported that they were fixed-term employed with permanent/continuous employment, while 6 % stated that they were fixed-term employed without continuous employment prospects.

These figures strengthen the portrayal the South African academic profession as an in-bred self-contained community. Few have work experience outside academia. Many academics are appointed straight from their graduate studies. This might be related to the fact that universities cannot compete well with the public sector, let alone the private sector; so to attract experienced well qualified personnel from industry is difficult. In a country where people with PhDs are very scarce, universities cannot afford to go the contract or fixed-term appointment way, but have to give faculty tenure from day one.

Regarding their sources of income 79 % of respondents indicated that, in addition to their current employer, they do not have any additional employer, and do no additional remunerated work. Five percent of respondents indicated that they additionally work at another research institute or higher education institution, 4 % of respondents had additional work at a business organization outside of academe, 4 % at a non-profit organization or government entity outside of academe, and 10 % as self-employed.

Table 6.6 Teaching-research preferences of South African academics (percentages)

Category	Responses
Primarily in teaching	18
In both, but leaning towards teaching	35
In both, but leaning towards research	37
Primarily in research	9

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

6.4.3 *Sense of Identity*

In response to a question regarding their preferences of teaching and research, 18 % expressed a prime interest in teaching (see Table 6.6). Thirty five percent stated that that they were interested both in teaching and research but leaned towards teaching. Thirty seven percent also expressed an interest in both, but leaned towards research, while only 9 % expressed a clear preference for research. Thus, altogether, slightly more than half were more strongly interested in teaching and slightly less than half in research.

While the majority of academics in the majority of countries includes in the CAP survey emphasize research more strongly, the academics in South Africa gravitate slightly towards the teaching pole. This is probably a relic from the past. A typical developing country, higher education in South Africa has long been seen to have the prime mission to educate trained human resources for a developing economy (*cf.* Sutherland and Wolhuter 2002). Writing as early as 1956, Smith (1956), who is famous for his pioneering work on the coelacanth, states the following: “Research at universities in South Africa has occupied a subordinate, and in many ways an uneasy position. University staff are normally appointed and paid for teaching, [and] while research is officially encouraged, anyone who devotes more than normal time to such work runs the risk of being regarded as not giving proper attention to the teaching for which he is being paid”. Faculty at South Africa carries excessive teaching commitments, which leave them little time for research and publishing (Sutherland and Wolhuter 2002: 79). Moreover, many students come to higher education from economically and educationally deprived backgrounds; teaching such students is demanding, time-consuming and pedagogically challenging when compared to teaching in higher education in developed countries (*Ibid.*). However institutional managers began to take research more seriously in recent decades. In 1984 the university subsidy formulae changed. The new subsidy links the amount of subsidy which government pays to a university to the university’s research output. Faculty has come under increasing pressure to publish. More so after South Africa re-joined the international academic community, and in times of globalization and the competition it has spawned, and the ideal of every university to become a world-class university (with research output an important factor in any university ranking system).

Table 6.7 South African academics' service and community involvement in current year (percentages; multiple reply possible)

Activity	Responses
Served as a member of national/international scientific bodies	24
Served as a peer reviewer	46
Served as editor of journal/book series	13
Served as electoral officer or leader in professional academic associations/organizations	20
Served as an elected officer in leader of unions	4
Been substantially involved in local, national of international politics	4
Been a member of a community organization or participated in community-based projects	37
Worked with local, national or international social service agencies	13
Other	5
None of these activities at all	23

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

6.4.4 *Service and Community Involvement*

Academics have been asked in what service activities there were involved in the current year both inside and outside academia. As Table 6.7 shows, the proportion of those involved in internal services is substantially higher those involved in external services. It is clear that South African academics have an identity as 'ivory tower' academics, maintaining a very low or no profile as far as community service/involvement is concerned. South African higher education institutions were historically modeled on their parent institutions in Britain (the erstwhile motherland). They simulated the model of liberal-academic education bequeathed to them from metropolitan Britain (Wolhuter 2009, p. 361). That made for 'ivory tower' like institutions, cut off from their surrounding communities.

In their scientific fraternities they are rather inactive too. This might be related to their peripheral location with respect to the world-hub of the scientific network, also that South Africa covers a large tract of land, with the 24 higher education institutions rather thinly spread and mostly far from each other.

6.4.5 *Sense of Commitment*

Respondents sense of commitment were probed by a number of questions. They were asked about their overall levels of job satisfaction, if they have, in the 5 years up to the survey, considered changing jobs, the number of hours they spent per week on various job related activities (teaching, research, community service, and administrative duties) and the intensity of affiliation they feel to each of their disciplines/academic fields, departments and institutions. Fifty one percent of respondents

Table 6.8 South African academics' having considered changing their job and having taken concrete action (percentages; multiple reply possible)

Direction of possible job change	Respondents considering change	Respondents having taken concrete action
To a management position in your higher education institution	20	14
To an academic position in another higher education institution within South Africa	29	7
To an academic position in another country	21	6
To work outside higher education	32	12
No, I have not considered making any changes in my job	43	39

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

Table 6.9 Importance South African academics attach to affiliations (percentage stating a strong affiliation)

Category	Responses
Your own academic discipline/field	93
Your department at your institution	76
Your institution	60

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

reported their level of job satisfaction as high, 29 % as neutral and 20 % as low. Twenty three were of the opinion that, since they had started their academic careers, working conditions in higher education have improved, 33 % that it has remained the same, and 44 % that it has deteriorated.

Table 6.8 presents responses regarding whether respondents have considered changing jobs within the last 5 years and whether they have taken concrete action to change their job. As Table 6.8 shows, more than half have considered changes, among them most frequently to work outside higher education. Concrete steps, however, were most frequently taken towards taking over a management position in their current higher education institution.

The importance which respondents attach to their affiliations with their academic discipline/fields, department and institutions is presented in Table 6.9. As in other countries, almost South African academics stated that the affiliation to their discipline is important for them, but very high proportions of respondents underscored the affiliation to their department and their institution as well.

Table 6.10 shows the average number of weekly hours the academics in South Africa teaching, research and other activities. Altogether, South African academics work less than the usually required numbers of hours (45 h in South Africa). Table 6.10 present the number of hours both for the period when classes are in session and when classes are not in session. Across the whole years, academics in South Africa seem to spend only slightly more than half as much time on research as they spend on teaching.

Table 6.10 Time spent by South African academics in teaching, research and other work-related activities (mean weekly hours)

Activity	Mean weekly hours	
	When classes are in session	When classes are not in session
Teaching (includes preparing lectures, instruction, student consulting and assessing students' work)	20.6	11.5
Research	8.8	15.1
Services (paid and unpaid)	2.7	3.3
Administration	7.0	7.5
Other	2.7	3.3
Total	41.8	40.9

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

Table 6.11 Research productivity of South African academics during the last 3 years (mean number)

Type of publications and papers	Mean number
Scholarly books authored/co-authored	1.7
Scholarly books edited/co-edited	1.5
Journal articles/book chapters	4.1
Conference papers	4.3

Source: CAP Survey 2007/2008

The respondents' research productivity is presented in Table 6.11. Accordingly, South African academics write and publish a book every 2 years on average, publish slightly more than one article annually and also present slightly more than one paper annually on average at a conference.

Altogether, the hours per week which academics spend on academic activities are low. Their research output is low too. Finally, their job satisfaction is not overly high, considering that not long ago the academic profession was one of the most prestigious in the country.

6.5 Conclusions

While the South African academic profession is highly feminized, it is a relatively old and aging profession. The last send up a red flag, in view of the practice of mandatory retirement at age 60 or 65, the fact that the most active researchers will retire in the next coming years, and that universities will lose institutional memory and their best researchers.

Most academics are married, with their spouses also working full-time (a third have spouses in the academic profession too). The mean academic still has two children staying with the family in the house. This means that the average South

African academic find him/herself in a situation as a member of a family, with roles and responsibilities towards other family members. Most South African academics therefore have family commitments and roles.

Most academics' spouses and parents are fairly well-educated. The White population and, within the White sector, the Afrikaner component continues to dominate the academic profession. The typical South African academic has entered the academic profession in his/her early thirties, and is on a permanent (tenured) full-time contract, the university being their sole source of income. The high percentage of academics being married to academics, the high correspondence between academics' level of education and that of their parents, and the dominance of the South African academic by White Afrikaans speaking South Africans, are indicative of the fossilized socio-economic stratification of South African society and its relative isolation from international, global influences. This trait of the profession stands in contrast with the policy of education and higher education serving as a vehicle of social mobility.

The profession straddles the teaching-research continuum, leaning slightly towards the teaching side. The social involvement of the South African worker, and their research productivity, likewise, is unimpressive. The profession seems to remain a self-contained community, living academically a strong 'ivory tower' like existence, relatively cut off from the This existence is at odds with the exigencies of post-1994 higher education policy and society. Their commitment to their profession does not seem high, neither is their job satisfaction. It seems as if the global and national trends of the higher education environment and their own expectations (which are steeped in the past) are moving into two opposite directions. For the well-being of South African higher education and society, this polarisation needs to be addressed.

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