
Academic Freedom in a Changing Academic World

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This article considers the academic profession and academic freedom in light of the results of the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey in Finland and four other European countries. Academic freedom is examined as a phenomenon that provides a setting for goal determination by members of the academic profession. It has a bearing on both institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom, i.e. the freedom of research and teaching. Academic freedom can be examined on the basis of material from the CAP survey through the questions about the freedom of teaching, the definition of work, working as a member of a community, the power of influence, funding, and the evaluation of quality. The concept of academic freedom varies slightly between countries, in part because of the growth of higher education systems and because of the increasing demand for ‘relevance’ being imposed on universities.

Introduction

The European universities of the 21st century have changed extensively because new generations of students have a much higher rate of access to higher education than did their predecessors. In addition, increased openness and transparency are demanded of publicly funded institutions, and the operating models for higher education institutions have been modernised. However, the need for change in university structures is also leading to changes in the substance of academic work.

The discussion here concerns the academic profession from the perspective of comparative research data obtained from the Changing Academic Profession

(CAP) survey. The empirical part of this article has been based on survey material from Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom. From the point of view of the academic profession in Finland, a new University Act enacted by the Parliament in 2009 (558/2009) will produce some radical structural changes, but this is only the starting point of the change process. The new Act and other changes afoot in the academic workplace will significantly reshape the working conditions at universities in the years ahead.

The question of academic freedom as the decisive competitive factor for the academic profession has emerged forcefully in Finland and in other countries. The nature of academic freedom is changing, just as there have been changes to the relative priority applied to concepts such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the legitimacy of various external expectations. As universities in Europe are moving to increasing autonomy, they can resist these trends and pressures by strengthening academic freedom and autonomy.¹

Universities in Finland have been part of the state administration, and the ministry-based system of regulating them has been firm. The current state of the academic profession in Finland is a product of the rigid bureaucratic structures and the strong legislative basis of university organisation that have restricted Finnish universities' ability to institute rapid change. The new University Act, to come into effect from 2010 onwards, will change the universities' administrative situation because they will cease to be units of state administration and will become independent legal entities under public law, or higher education institutions run by foundations. Actors from outside the universities, including those from the private sector, will participate in the administration and funding of Finnish universities to an increasing degree. The essence of the reform is that the overall responsibility for improving the conditions of the division of labour will be transferred to the universities as they will become independent legal entities. During these higher education reforms, expectations of freedom as an effect of autonomy is leading to a growing discussion on new forms of academic freedom.

Any attempt to compare and contrast responses across national borders will usually reveal some differences in interpretation. This is also the case with the CAP survey. For instance, the Finnish CAP survey collected data from full-time staff from both sides of its dual higher education sector, i.e. both its universities (77%) and universities of applied sciences (also referred to as polytechnics or AMK in some publications in English). Staff from independent public or private research institutes were not surveyed for Finnish CAP, nor were staff working for the education and science ministry and the science administration bodies.² In Norway, however, over 38% of respondents came not from universities but from research institute.³ In the German CAP survey, around one-third of respondents worked in public research institutes.

The academic freedom guaranteed by Finnish legislation means above all the freedom for researchers to choose their academic discipline and their specific subject area and, in the case of those involved in the creative and performing arts, the freedom to choose the mode of expression and the methods to be used. In teaching, freedom is ensured for content and methods, although some targets may be set out in a budgetary framework. In a number of countries, however, restrictions have been placed on the freedom of teaching. University teachers must observe the statutes and regulations concerning teaching. The quality assessment of teaching is comprehensive.

This article focuses on the institutional dimension of academic freedom and is based on responses to several questions in the CAP survey, namely:

- Which actors have the primary influence on decision making?
- What amount of personal influence do respondents feel they can exert?
- By whom is teaching, research and service regularly evaluated?

In this article, Finland serves as a case study for the examination of institutional and individual academic freedom in a system that is undergoing a decentralisation of authority from the state to individual higher education institutions. Therefore, this is not a complete picture of academic freedom, but it does provide a comparative perspective on academic freedom in the five European countries considered. These countries represent different traditions of European higher education, as discussed later in this article.

Defining the academic profession

Defining the research community is challenging, even from inside higher education institutions. A researcher's role can be different in universities and universities of applied sciences, and it can also differ between disciplines within a single university, between higher education institutions and research institutions, and between institutions from the private and public sectors. In some countries, the majority of researchers work outside higher education institutions and therefore do not belong to the academic profession as it has been defined in this analysis.

This is the case even if they have an academic occupation. For instance, according to David Dill,⁴ persons with academic occupations at universities tend to be in academic departments undertaking academic tasks. Some academics focus on administrative tasks while others focus on teaching and research. Researchers, on the other hand, are those whose task it is to promote knowledge. In practice, it is only possible to have a career in professional research after undertaking education specific to the discipline, which is why universities have had a central role in research training. The rapid growth cycle of knowledge,

however, has led to a situation where universities are no longer able to ensure that professional knowledge will endure for a lifetime.⁵

Because research does not occur exclusively at higher education institutions, there is an overlap between researchers' work and work performed by other staff. Other staff with an academic postgraduate degree work primarily outside higher education institutions, producing information for research institutions, businesses, science administration or libraries. In Finland, for instance, this means that the academic profession includes researchers at universities and universities of applied sciences. The tasks of the academic profession in Finland thus are related to research, teaching, social effectiveness, or to the academic governance positions in institutions executing these tasks. Applying Donald Light's definition to the Finnish context, the academic profession in universities constitutes a strong community that essentially evaluates its members' competence, carries the responsibility for the quality of work, enjoys high social prestige, founds its operation on a complex body of knowledge, and influences the recruitment of staff to undertake both academic tasks and the training of those appointed to the positions.⁶

Commitment to the academic community occurs primarily through tasks performed in departments and faculties, with most positions in Finland being those occupied by professors, assistant professors, principal lecturers, lecturers, assistants and researchers. Despite some minor variations, these ranks are typical for all countries examined for this article. Academic careers have been quite consistent in Finland and advancement through the academic ranks has normally presupposed working through the different career steps. However, full-time work aimed at achieving academic merit is not a completely positive phenomenon. Staff mobility between universities and other employers has been restricted in favour of universities because of the dominant status of research and teaching merit when academic vacancies are filled.

No serious challenge to the academic profession within universities has emerged. The introduction of tripartite decision-making in Finland's administrative reform of 1972 provided students with a decision making role, but the role of interest groups other than academic staff has remained remote. This partly explains why the ability of the different disciplines to tackle essential problems has varied. For instance, the relevance of research information, the capacity to weed out teaching of poor quality, and the production of coherently functional information are areas in which the self-regulation of the academic profession has not functioned satisfactorily. These problems have manifested themselves as vague university profiles, lack of strategic control and practical problems affecting the academic profession, such as short-term employment at universities.⁷

The social meaning of the academic profession as the producer and disseminator of knowledge has grown, but the status of the academic profession at the organisational level is also affected by factors of insecurity related to the

change in both the role of the state and the economies of higher education institutions. At the level of higher education institutions, insecurity is correspondingly generated by the new models of participation and the demands for more relevant research, as well as by changes in the traditional mechanisms of academic collegiality and social involvement, to name but a few examples.⁸ These factors of insecurity seem to have appeared simultaneously in most economically advanced countries, and the answer to this is sought in the impact, effectiveness and relevance of the higher education system.

In Finland, for instance, a career in research is becoming less attractive because it has changed into primarily fixed-term employment, at least in the early career stages. Proposals to establish a tenure track system have been discussed recently by the Ministry of Education as a means of promoting a transparent and more predictable research career.⁹ As pointed out in the final report of a working group at the Ministry of Education on careers in research, the problems also include low levels of mobility and the difficulty of combining external research funding and career development. For women, career development is also impeded by special problems, such as having fixed-term employment more often.¹⁰

The CAP research project in Finland has been implemented at a time when the 'civil service' relationships of traditional academic careers are changing into 'employment' relationships. This may have far-reaching consequences for the general work situation for the academic profession. In conjunction with the reforms that will follow from the 2010 University Act, the transformation of traditional bureaucratic structures into employment relationships will change the traditional academic merit system and at the same time promote a division of labour in which expertise can focus on the different subsections of academic work. In Finland, academic work could gradually shift from its place in the stable national context of Finnish universities into a changing, modern environment operating internationally. This change in the situation of academic work is not an independent or unique phenomenon; rather, it is part of the change in which higher education institutions are disengaging from the traditional higher education model and moving, in tune with a general social development, towards higher education with an emphasis on relevance. In this case, the autonomy of higher education institutions will adopt new forms that will bring the work carried out at higher education institutions closer to the work done in the rest of the society.

Academic freedom and the academic profession

Academic freedom is a fundamental principle for universities, and with it comes the idea of responsibility of all members of the scholarly community. In the knowledge society, academic freedom relating to teaching and research must also exist 'virtually', outside classrooms where there is little scope for control by

those who distribute research resources.¹¹ Governments in Europe have exerted firm control over higher education, and academic freedom is connected to decentralization at the institutional level. Decentralization promotes institutional autonomy, and therefore can be considered another form of academic freedom. Institutional academic freedom is a concept similar to institutional autonomy,¹² but it is discussed less often than traditional individual academic freedom.

In practice, the realisation of academic freedom is secured by legislation, i.e. universities are guaranteed the right to self-governance and the right to elect their own executive bodies independently of government control or supervision. These executive bodies hold the power to recruit teachers and researchers, for instance. Terence Karran, who has studied academic freedom in 23 European countries, found that Finland and Germany are countries that ensure academic freedom by strong legislative protection, whereas Italy and United Kingdom are countries with low legislative protection.¹³ Finland scored among the top countries in this respect, but the growth of a diversified funding base and the high levels of fixed-term employment are issues diminishing formal academic freedom.

The Magna Charta of European Universities, a document approved by university principals in 1988, defines the social and economic objectives for universities. In the background there is the strong European concept of universities as institutions managing a public task with the purpose of serving the common good.¹⁴ The Magna Charta brings a perspective aimed at securing the autonomy of universities, ensuring a close link between teaching and research, guaranteeing the freedom of research and teaching, and guarding the European humanistic heritage. This supports the traditional understanding of the academic profession that regards research and teaching as inseparable. In this situation, the *freedom of research* is essential to universities, manifested as the freedom to choose the subjects, theories, methods and channels of publication. In Finland, the realisation of these principles tends to be viewed as an important, even essential, factor in securing the general work situation for members of the academic profession.

This line of thinking is inspired by the notion of the effect of the knowledge-based economy on knowledge generation in universities in a situation in which research to a large extent is carried out in contexts other than higher education institutions. Once, universities used to monopolized the provision of research training and awarding academic degrees, but now industrial and public sector institutions are following the *modus operandi* of universities. This situation is changing as the context of higher education is changing from the national level to European and global levels. Particularly in the global information economy, universities follow the rest of the society, and the resulting demands on relevance are considered to be restrictions on academic freedom.

The interest of universities in producing knowledge for the sake of knowledge is still relevant, and an individual point of view to academic freedom can be

defined from this angle. It means that academic freedom manifests itself as the freedom of teaching and learning.¹⁵ In Germany, this kind of academic freedom ensures the intellectual growth of the members of university communities. The Finnish perspective is also largely based on the German university tradition. The Humboldtian point of view started to be accepted in Finland in the 19th century. However, the two countries have differences in emphasis regarding how academic freedom should be secured. In Germany, academic freedom is guaranteed under law to professors, whereas in Finland the corresponding legislation regards teaching and teachers more widely. This has both positive and negative consequences for the composition of the academic community. In Finland, teachers are primarily responsible for teaching, which is reflected in their working community behaviour.

Research findings – institutional autonomy

Academic freedom also has an administrative dimension, guaranteeing higher education institutions independence from the state. The institutional dimension is an important angle for the countries undergoing decentralisation reforms, even with respect to the organisational field level.¹⁶ In this framework, the CAP survey provides information on institutional autonomy and the influence of the academic profession. In the CAP survey, attitudes to institutional autonomy can be studied as an aspect of the academic profession based on respondents' perception of their influence in the decision making processes of their own higher education institution and even within the whole of the higher education sector. In this case, the focus is on the representation of the academic profession on administrative bodies, the election of the higher education institutions' central bodies, and on the extent of participation in the internal decision making process at higher education institutions.

Work allocation characteristics of respondents

Respondents participate in decision making in different ways according to their country's traditions. Table 1 summarises this participation for Finland and the other European nations examined. In Italy and Norway it is typical for respondents to serve as members of national or international scientific bodies. The nature of universities is that they are recognised as bottom-heavy organisations with craft-like traditional academic work:¹⁷ more than half of respondents have served as peer reviewers. On the matter of participation in peer review, there exists a considerable gap between participation in the UK (85%) compared with Finland and Germany (53% and 54%, respectively). In Finland, the share of those who have served as an elected officer or as the leader of a union is higher than other countries. This is due to the high participation rate in discipline-based

Table 1. Academic and social activities of respondents during the current academic year (multiple replies; percentage of respondents)

	Finland	Germany	Italy	Norway	UK
Served as a member of national/international scientific committees/boards/bodies	32	37	62	50	36
Served a peer reviewer (e.g. for journals, research sponsors, institutional evaluations)	53	54	67	69	85
Served as an editor of journals/book series	19	41	12	14	29
Served as an elected officer or leader in professional/academic association/organisations	38	43	13	17	20
Served as an elected officer or leader of unions	39	1	1	13	4
Had been substantially involved in local, national or international politics	5	3	5	8	5
Had been a member of a community organisations or participated in community-based projects	26	0	17	33	27
Worked with local, national or international social service agencies	21	25	10	12	15

Source: CAP survey 2007–2008.

organisations and trade unions. Variations between countries such as these reflect differences in the academic career setting in the various countries.

Influence of the academic profession

CAP respondents were asked to characterize the influence of key actors in higher education in ten decision-making areas. This question aims to establish how ‘authority’ is distributed within higher education institutions.⁸ To assess which actors were perceived as the most influential, the questionnaire posed a series of questions about influence over certain decisions/activities (Table 2). The actors taken into consideration were the government or other external stakeholders, institutional managers, academic unit managers, faculty committees or boards, individual academic staff and students. The first statement concerned academics’ views about which group had the strongest influence in selecting the key administrators at higher education institutions.

Germany demonstrated the most diverse pattern of influence for selecting key administrators. The role of institutional managers was seen as being of most importance in selecting key administrators, particularly in Italy, Norway and Finland. The role of faculty committees and boards is also perceived as being quite strong, but to a lesser extent in Italy and Norway. The role of academic unit managers was also reflected to a lesser extent in Italy and Norway. Only in Germany was the role of the government or other external stakeholders in selecting key administrators seen as influential. Finally, the roles of individual members of the academic staff and students were perceived as being the weakest of all.

As the institutional managers were perceived as being the most influential, it is appropriate to pay more attention to their role in decision making more broadly. Table 3 shows the proportion of respondents that selected ‘institutional managers’ as

Table 2. Perceived single most influential actor in selecting key administrative actors at higher education institutions (percentage of respondents)

	Finland	Germany	Italy	Norway	UK
Government or external stakeholders	3	13	5	2	3
Institutional managers	68	47	78	70	60
Academic unit managers	6	15	7	17	13
Faculty committees/boards	18	21	7	9	19
Individual faculty members	5	4	3	1	6
Students	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: CAP survey 2007–2008.

Table 3. Key administrators viewed as having the primary influence on select areas of decision making (percentage of respondents)*

	Finland	Germany	Italy	Norway	UK
Selecting key administrators	68	47	78	70	60
Choosing new academic staff	17	25	4	29	17
Making academic staff promotion and tenure decisions	32	28	4	51	32
Determining budget priorities	47	64	41	60	57
Approving new academic programmes	32	41	8	N/A	26
Evaluating teaching	21	23	8	19	14
Setting internal research priorities	28	19	6	38	25
Evaluating research	34	29	12	23	19

* The share of respondents who chose the alternative ‘institutional managers’ in response to the following question: ‘At your institution, which actor has the primary influence on each of the following decisions?’ Respondents were asked to choose only one actor for each statement.

Source: CAP survey 2007–2008.

the actor with primary influence over a range of decisions. As also shown in Table 2, the role of institutional managers in selecting key administrators was quite high in all five countries. Their role was also seen as considerable in terms of determining budgetary priorities, ranging from 64% in the case of Germany to 41% in Italy.

Those responsible for institutional management are perceived as having a variable role in matters relating to choosing academic staff and related promotion and tenure issues, approving academic programmes evaluating teaching and in research-related matters. For example, institutional managers have a strong role in a process of approving new academic programmes in Finland and Germany (32% and 41%, respectively), but it is also quite high in the UK (26%). In Norway, institutional managers’ role in setting internal research priorities is higher than other countries due to the prominent share of respondents from research institutes. University management is also considered to have an important role in the evaluation of research in Finland (34%) and Germany (29%). With the exception of decisions relating to selecting key administrators and determining budget priorities, Italian respondents saw a much smaller role for institutional managers on issues relating to academic staff, teaching and research issues examined in the CAP survey.

Table 4 considers the role of the various actors in evaluating research. The relatively high influence exerted by institutional managers revealed in Table 3

Table 4. Perceived primary influence of actors at institutions in evaluating research (percentage of respondents)

	Finland	Germany	Italy	Norway	UK
Government or external stakeholders	11	17	15	18	19
Institutional managers	34	29	12	23	19
Academic unit managers	16	20	17	21	20
Faculty committees/boards	18	18	33	12	25
Individual faculty members	21	16	23	26	18
Students	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: CAP survey 2007–2008.

can be seen, with ratings varying from 34% in Finland to 12% in Italy, but the role played by other actors is also shown. A major role in this respect is also played by faculty committees and boards, particularly in Italy (33%) and the UK (25%). The results demonstrate the influence of governments or external stakeholders in evaluating research, which reflects the existence of national evaluation and quality assessment systems. In Norway the major role is played by individual faculty members (26%), a rate higher than in the other countries. Differences between countries are less pronounced in research evaluation than in other activities. Again, there is no perception in any of the countries that students have any influence on research evaluation.

Research findings – academic freedom for individual faculty members

One of the issues for which the CAP survey sought answers was the respondents' influence on how central academic manners of operation are moulded. Respondents suggest that the amount of influence rapidly decreases as one moves from the individual academic staff member level to faculty committees, faculty boards and higher university structures. Only about one-third of respondents felt that they were very influential or quite influential at the unit level. Slightly less than one third of respondents felt that they had no influence or role at all. This is quite natural, yet the contrast between countries in the results was surprisingly high. German academics are convinced that they have considerable influence in their department.

Even at the faculty level, the number of respondents who felt they were very influential or quite influential is significantly lower. About two-thirds of respondents feel that they have no influence at all or no possibility of participating in making decisions about their own institution. Looking at the university

Table 5. Perceived communication and decision and decision-making styles (percentage of respondents stating ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’)

	Finland	Germany	Italy	Norway	UK
Good communication between management and academics	31	29	27	44	23
A top-down management style	56	42	52	25	72
Collegiality in decision-making process	24	31	16	31	21
There is a supportive attitude of administrative staff towards teaching activities	25	25	19	41	44
The administration supports academic freedom	22	40	48	34	40

Source: CAP survey 2007–2008.

level, the perception of having influence is even lower. Expertise based on academic work does not carry with it any power or influence concerning the higher-level structures. Respondents perceived their influence to be strongest at the departmental level where the influence of the academic profession is strong.

Other questions in the CAP survey addressed managerial styles, as summarised in Table 5. In Finland, Italy and the UK a majority of respondents noted a top-down management style. Germany and Norway had the largest share of those who observed elements of collegiality in the prevailing decision-making processes.

The material drawn from the Changing Academic Profession survey conveys a picture of an administrative culture based on a top-down management style in Finland, Italy and the UK. The significance of collegiality as an important aspect of the decision making process is low, as collegiality is affiliated to disciplines and departments, not to higher education institutions as such. In German and Norwegian responses the institutional management style is less likely to be top-down than in the other countries involved. In all these five countries, fewer than half of the respondents felt that the administration supported academic freedom.

Conclusions

The traditional forms of academic freedom comprise both institutional autonomy and the freedom of research and teaching. This definition is changing because demands for increasing relevance are being imposed on higher education institutions. Lines of thinking based on the Magna Charta on the one hand and the

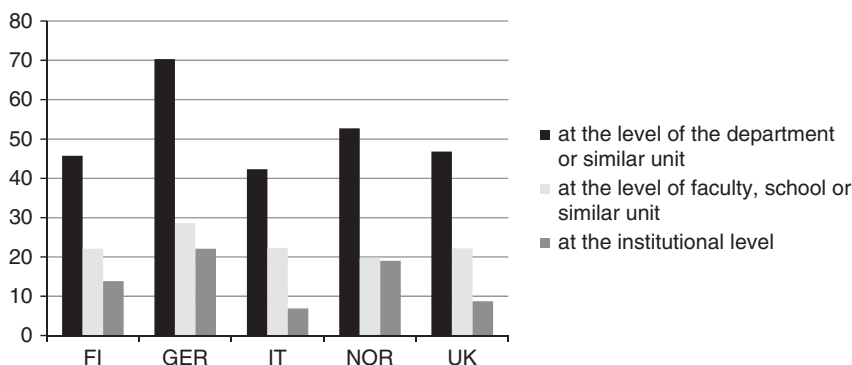


Figure 1. Respondents' personal influence in helping to shape key academic policies (percentage of respondents stating 'very influential' or 'somewhat influential').

European 'Knowledge Society' or 'Information Society' on the other hand represent genuinely different approaches to the change in the work of the academic profession. The results of the Changing Academic Profession survey indicate that the traditional keys to internal change in universities and reform of the division of labour can be found not only in system-level autonomy, but also at the faculty and departmental levels.

In the United Kingdom the peer review tradition is strong, and universities' core functions are evaluated according to discipline. In Finland, the role of trade unions is still strong in universities. All these higher education systems guarantee academic freedom by different means. For the academic profession, academic freedom is an important issue, but it is manifested in different ways.

Collegial decision making has still a role in these countries. This can be observed especially in the case of Germany, where respondents exert strong personal influence in helping to shape key academic policies at the departmental level. However, most of the respondents reported that they do not have any influence at all or no possibility to participate in the decision making process at the institutional level. In all these countries, the academic profession holds primary influence on decision making at the departmental level (Figure 1).

According to the results of CAP survey, Norwegian respondents find there is good communication between management and academics. They also point out a supportive attitude towards research activities and that the influence of institutional managers is stronger than in the other countries surveyed. These slightly different attitudes are due to the fact that 38% of respondents come from public research institutes. Respondents in all the countries examined felt that their influence was stronger at the departmental level than at the faculty level or the institutional level.

Academic freedom is realized at the department and faculty level. The role of institutional managers is crucial to selecting key administrators, and they serve as gatekeepers for the appointment of academic staff. As gatekeepers, institutional managers have a role in ensuring academic freedom, while the managers' power rests in determining budget priorities. In Germany and Finland, both countries ensuring academic freedom by strong legislative protection, the role of the institutional manager is strongest.

The increasing role of external reviewers is a sign of limiting institutional academic freedom. At the personal level, this is not necessarily a constraint of the academic profession. External reviewers will also legitimate the mode of action at both the department and faculty levels. The changing role of the academic profession also means a changing setting for academic freedom. Academic freedom has its focus at the departmental and faculty levels, and this phenomenon does not differ much between the various education systems, regardless of the question of whether the legislative framework is strong or weak.

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