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Careers in overlapping institutional contexts

The case of academe

Marc Kaulisch and Jürgen Enders

*Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente,
Enschede, The Netherlands*

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Abstract

Purpose – Studying academic careers can be particularly useful for discussions about new forms of professional careers. This conceptual paper seeks to shed light on academic careers by discussing the (changing) multiple contexts governing academic careers.

Design/methodology/approach – A neo-institutional framework for analysing academic careers is developed that treats them as outcomes of overlapping institutions belonging to the different social contexts in which academics simultaneously act. This approach allows one to locate academic careers in the context of new and traditional career literature and to address changes in the institutional context of academic careers.

Findings – Shows how traditional structures and mechanisms of academic careers are interwoven with the overall patterns of national higher education systems and their societal embeddedness. Empirical evidence was found that academic careers are becoming more boundaryless. But evidence was also found that academic careers are more bound to the organisation due to recent changes in university policies and practices.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is limited to the discussion of overlapping institutional contexts governing academic careers. Further international comparisons could deepen understanding of specific formal and informal rules. Future macro-micro research enables one to show how the career models can be traced to the career experiences and practices. Micro-macro research allows one to see how the aggregate outcomes of individual actions can be traced to the overall performance of a given higher education system.

Originality/value – This conceptual paper proposes a neo-institutional framework for analysing academic careers. This approach is useful for cross-national comparisons, the study of emerging new career models and practices in academe, and the study of macro-micro-links in career research.

Keywords Academic staff, Organizational theory, Career development, Managerialism, Germany, United States of America

Paper type Conceptual paper



Introduction

Like all working people academics go through a sequence of jobs, work roles and experiences; they go through a career. While academic careers have not been studied extensively in the past (Cuthbert, 1996) it has recently been argued (Baruch and Hall, 2004) that the study of academic careers can be of special value for career research in general. In particular, academic careers possess certain features that make them

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markedly different when compared to conventional hierarchical, bureaucratic models. Since the early work of Caplow and McGee (1958), studies on academic careers have emphasized special features that make investigations into this field interesting for discussions about new forms of careers in other organizations (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) such as the protean, the post-corporate or the boundaryless career (Richardson and McKenna, 2002; Baruch and Hall, 2004). Whilst synergy between academic careers and the “new careers” literature is evidently strong, there is also reason for caution. Traditional academic career systems also have features that reflect characteristics of more traditional career models, such as “tenure” and a fairly rigid career hierarchy (Perna *et al.*, 1995; Weiner, 1996; Richardson and McKenna, 2002).

It is thus useful to locate academic careers in the context of both traditional and new career literature. This argument is also supported by recent changes in academic careers. On the one hand there is empirical evidence that academic careers are becoming more boundaryless, such as growing international mobility of faculty members, the greater reliance on part-time and adjunct staff, post-tenure review and experiments with alternative contracts (Gappa, 2002, Chait, 2002). On the other hand, policies and practices are moving from collegial or professional governance models to management models, aligning academics’ activities more closely with the interests and needs of their organization, and strengthening the role of universities’ internal labor markets for academic careers (Kogan *et al.*, 1994; Farnham, 1999; Enders, 2001a). Such trends may also mean that academic careers become more bound to their organization (Harley *et al.*, 2004).

In this overall context, the main aim of this paper is to increase our understanding of academic careers through an analysis of the (changing) multiple contexts that govern them (Gläser, 2001). We develop a neo-institutional framework for the analysis of careers in academe by emphasizing the different social contexts in which academics simultaneously act. These yield specific institutions in which academic careers unfold. First, certain traditional features of academic careers are due to their institutional embeddedness in the overall science system and their academic discipline (Chubin, 1976; Tobias *et al.*, 1995). Second, academic careers are conditioned by national settings and different cultural contexts, which are addressed here in order to understand variations in national models of formal and informal rules (Clark, 1987; Altbach, 1996; Enders and Teichler, 1997). Third, the changing organizational context of academic work is addressed so as to examine the possible effects of apparent global trends towards marketization and managerialism on academic careers (Taylor, 1999; Enders, 2002; Harley *et al.*, 2004).

A neo-institutional framework for the study of academic careers

Academic careers are complex and dynamic. As a result, we argue that they can be better understood by accounting for the fact that academics act simultaneously in several social contexts. In order to synthesize these institutional influences, we use a neo-institutional approach. Founded primarily by organizational sociology researchers (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977), neo-institutionalism has been employed by a wide range of disciplines including economics, sociology and political science (for an overview see Scott, 2001). The main advantage to neo-institutional approaches is that they seek to describe human behaviour not by social structures but instead as shaped

or governed by social structures that are also results of (collective) human agency (Sewell, 1992; Keman, 1997; Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Walgenbach, 1999; Hasse and Krücken, 2000; Gläser, 2001; Beckert, 2002). Formal and informal rules inform agents about the range of actions expected, accepted and legitimized in a specific situation. In this paper we define such systems of formal and informal rules as institutions (Scharpf, 1997; Gläser, 2001).

Another rationale for using a neo-institutional approach is that it regards individuals as “knowledgeable” (Giddens, 1984) about the rules and resources at a specific time yet not fully informed; institutions can only be effective when they are known and perceived by humans. In addition, an essential argument for human agency within social structures is that institutions are overlapping and possibly conflicting (Hasse and Krücken 2000; Gläser, 2001; see also Giddens, 1984). Different institutional contexts yield specific formal and informal rules that may or may not be in conflict with one another. This ambiguity and diffuseness of institutions allows individuals to act contradictory to specific rules. Not only can they adjust actions according to new institutional settings but also transform their institutional knowledge from one institutional setting into another. Social structures thus enable humans to act within a specific room for manoeuvre that is governed but not determined by formal and informal rule systems.

Whilst neo-institutional theory allows us to conceptualize the link between social structure and human agency as recursive, the focus in this paper is on the institutional embeddedness of human agency in social structure. Like other researchers (Archer, 1982; Giddens, 1984; Barley and Tolbert, 1997) we analytically separate the analysis of social structure and human agency. Below we explore several basic assumptions about the three institutional contexts that yield specific institutions in which academic careers unfold.

Science rules

Career researchers tend to be struck by traditional features of academic careers that resemble models emphasized in the new career literature: flat hierarchical career structures, free agency due to academic freedom, knowledge- and peer-review based decisions in the labor market, emphasis on inter-organizational mobility, the self-management of careers, the role of networks and mentoring, or the use of alternative work arrangements (Baruch and Hall, 2004). Such features can, at least partly, be understood by addressing the cognitive and social particularity of science and the traditional arrangements for the activity science is centered around – research.

Research, both the primary academic task and performance indicator, is foremost organized within the science system. Knowledge production is done within disciplines or specialties by formulating research problems, selecting methods and evaluating results. Research-related academic careers are embedded in these specialized “academic tribes and territories” (Becher, 1989) and depend on what scientists’ colleagues all over the world are doing (Whitley, 1984; Gläser, 2001). Academics tend to know what their colleagues and competitors in other parts of the world are doing much more than what their colleague in another academic field next door is doing. The academic career model thus builds on networking, not only within the organization but more importantly across organizations.

The most important rewards academics receive are not given by the organization but by the specialities within the overall science system. Reputation is the greatest reward given that career competition is organized around formal and informal evaluations of productivity relative to peers. Reputation and prestige are indirect indicators of academic performance and form the basis for academics' social stratification within a given speciality (Whitley, 1984; Stephan, 1996). Status striving within science relies to a considerable extent on individual performance or group performance that is assigned to individuals. In this regard, career advancement is primarily subject to performance (not to tenure) and self-initiated. (Baruch and Hall, 2004). Accumulating reputation within the scientific community is predominantly what keeps academics at work. This implies that academics are likely to show much higher commitment to their discipline than to their employer or organization (Enders and Teichler, 1997). Ben-David (1971/1984) summarized this by calling academics "publicly paid private practitioners". They act as "free agents" that can move relatively easy from one organization to another as long as it fits their research agenda and "cognitive career". Job mobility between scientific fields and organizations is also cognitive mobility. Academics receive tacit knowledge from colleagues and transfer knowledge to them as well. These cognitive careers provide the ground for scientific innovations (Gläser, 2001).

Scholarly output and reputation may also help to explain the different role of material resources in academic careers. Academics certainly "work for money". Traditionally they are fairly paid and only rarely in the top ranges of remuneration systems. Empirical evidence suggests that academics are usually much more likely to show specific interest in mobilizing additional material resources to support their research than in salary increase. This is particularly true when academics search for material support through research grants outside their organization. Academics are not dis-interested or altruistic but instead are prestige-seeking actors who have learned that reputation relies on scholarly productivity and that scholarly productivity relies – apart from individual qualifications – on the availability of resources for research (Latour and Woolgar, 1979).

The examples above (for a more extensive discussion, Baruch and Hall, 2004) help to explain differences between traditional features of academic careers and classical models of careers on internal labor markets (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Kalleberg and Sørensen, 1979; Althausen, 1989). Important for the study of academics careers within an organizational perspective, it is the specialities that provide employers important signals because vacant positions tend to be offered for specific specializations. The discipline in which an academic is trained, the field (s)he works in and the methods they can apply are important allocation criteria. These are connected to the academics' performance by way of publications, conference proceedings, acquired research funds, and teaching evaluations. The organizational context usually defines the availability of positions and decision-making processes while allocation decisions are handed over to the specialities. Academics themselves become the main authority in the job allocation process. In addition, universities traditionally developed relatively flat firm internal labor markets (Sørensen, 1992; Enders, 1996; Gläser, 2001). Academic organizations invest little in in-house training for their own internal labor market and often externally recruit for non-entry positions (Gläser, 2001). High mobility and fluctuation are seen as innovative features and not as inefficient. Academic labor markets thus

share certain characteristics with occupational or professional labor markets. They are characterized by small performance units, professional autonomy, flat hierarchies, and a high level of qualifications (Sørensen, 1992). At the same time, academic labor markets also tend to create a specific mix of open and closed positions (Sørensen, 1983). Non-tenured positions are traditionally offered to junior academics as a stock of relatively open positions. These positions create an extended probationary period for the observation of aspiring academics by their peers. In contrast, tenured positions are very closed from the point of view of the employer. The traditional meaning of tenure in academia lies in autonomous work conditions coupled with poor opportunities for employers to monitor productivity – resulting in an unusually high degree of job security.

But national context matters

We have argued that understanding the embeddedness of academic careers within the science system is helpful for explaining certain traditional features of academic careers *vis-à-vis* traditionally hierarchical, bureaucratic career models. At the same time, one can not neglect that the prevailing structures and mechanisms of academic careers are interwoven with the overall patterns of national higher education systems and their societal embeddedness (Ben-David, 1971/1984; Gläser, 2001; Baruch and Hall, 2004; Harley *et al.*, 2004; Sargent and Waters 2004). Staff structures, career trajectories, and working conditions are to some extent organized differently in specific national settings (Clark, 1987; Neave and Rhoades, 1987; Kogan *et al.*, 1994; Enders, 2001a). This may comprise main dimensions usually addressed in the application of labor market and career research, such as: the extent to which firm-internal labor markets and respective career ladders have been developed; formal and informal expectations about qualifications; the recruitment of staff on internal or external labor markets, intra-organizational career mobility; and the timing of major career decisions in the academic life course. It seems most unlikely that such national differences do not affect related career practices as demonstrated, for example, by Sargent and Waters' (2004) work on academic collaboration. Below we highlight the embeddedness of academic careers in the institutional context of the higher education system by contrasting certain features of the academic career models in Germany and the USA – two countries that have had a strong influence on other academic systems.

The most obvious distinction between the German and the US models is the extent to which German academic labor markets are regulated by formalized and standardized government rules (Sørensen, 1992; Altbach, 2000; Schimank, 2001). Academics are public servants thus employment conditions and salaries are regulated by governmental laws and decrees. In comparison, employment conditions for academic staff in the US are considerably less prescribed and may differ considerably between and within universities (Clark, 1997). This strongly influences the extent to which US universities can compete among each other for scholars based on salaries and other employment-related incentives. It also has an impact on how the academic institution of tenure is traditionally perceived within the two systems. American scholars of academic careers are usually struck by the exceptionalism of tenure as an unusually high degree of job security (Gappa, 2002; Chait, 2002) compared to other employment sectors. In Germany, “academic tenure” was traditionally not perceived as

exceptional because the majority of civil servants enjoyed the same job security privileges as tenured academics (Schimank, 2001; Enders, 2001b).

Second, the German and US academic career models can be represented by two ideal types: the chair and the department-college model (Neave and Rhoades, 1987). The chair model contrasts sharply between the traditional professorial core, holding tenured positions as chair-holders, and the largely untenured junior staff. German junior academics usually go through a relatively long contract-style career based on a series of fixed-term appointments. In this system it is not only essential to have a PhD to stay within an academic career but a second PhD (the Habilitation) as well, in order to get promoted to a professorial position (Enders, 2001a). The decision over a tenured position comes late in this career line, usually after the age of 40 (Karpen and Hanske, 1994). Under these conditions, professorial appointments are seen as big jumps in status, prestige, independence and resources (Neave and Rhoades, 1987; Enders and Teichler, 1997). In contrast, the American department-college model is traditionally built around a more collegial basic unit. Academic staff from lower ranks to (full) professor basically have the same tasks and status depends on publicly acknowledged qualifications and expertise. The probationary period of non-tenured staff is shorter, admission into the regular staff structure of tenured positions comes earlier and further career steps within academe are more regularly organized. Relatively early after having achieved the PhD, an academic can get a tenure-track position in which (s)he is given time to show colleagues that they are good enough to obtain tenure.

Third, the timing of major career decisions and the structure of competition on internal or external labor markets vary with the two academic career models. In the German system, vacancy filling involves ranking a set of externally applying candidates (Musselin, 2003); it is legally not permitted to promote a junior staff member to a professorial position within the same organization. The recruitment of non-professorial academic staff is highly fragmented and localized (Schimank, 2001). It is based on personal contacts between professors and junior staff who are often recruited from within the organization. In Germany, promotion ladders for junior staff are thus part of the internal labor market while tenure relies on the external labor market (Enders, 1996). In contrast, the opportunities for “contest”-mobility in doctoral and post-doctoral career stages are evidently richer in the USA. The usual expectation for junior academics is to change universities after getting their under-graduate degree as well as completing their PhD. In the next career step the career model in the USA allows for promotion on the internal labor market within the tenure track based on peer review by absolute standards.

Finally, differences in national career models cannot be fully understood without taking into account that they reflect and reinforce different patterns of organizational stratification in the higher education system (Altbach, 2000; Enders, 2001b). The classic German pattern is characterized by skewed inequality between staff in the form of a chair system and less pronounced inequality between organizations. Universities are typically more homogenous than those in the US system with its highly institutionalized pecking order between universities. In the German system, individual career success is measured more by the outcome of the main career events within the strongly hierarchical career ladder of the academic estate than by the prestige of the organizations involved. Higher education systems, like that in the USA, which stimulate competition among academic staff and within the institutional pecking order

might allow for a less hierarchical career ladder and a more collegial approach within the academic profession.

And contexts of academic careers are changing

In many industrial societies after World War II, the coincidence of various phenomena contributed to a political climate that allowed for a substantial increase in expenses on higher education and research (Altbach, 1991; Teichler, 1996). In those days a consensus emerged among faculty in modern universities about what it meant to be a professional in the higher academic strata:

- research forms the more prominent focus of academic work and knowledge is pursued for its own sake;
- the search for the latest frontiers of truth is best organized in academic-disciplinary units;
- reputation is established in national and international peer groups of scholars; and
- quality is assured by peer review and academic freedom (Gappa, 2002).

Recent experience shows that these defining notions of the academic career are not a-historically given but likely to be contested in various ways (Farnham, 1999).

The massification of higher education led to growth in faculty numbers, sometimes in a relatively uncontrolled way that not always brought respected quality into the profession (Altbach, 1991). At the same time, privileges that were typical for the members of the academic profession in an elite higher education system increasingly came under pressure in the massified and more diversified system (Trow, 1972). More and more faculty faced the fact that the “gold standards” that were once characteristic for the few were not necessarily applicable for the many. The concurrent rise of a class of non-professorial teachers (in response to the growing student numbers) and of a group of externally financed contracted research staff are more or less international phenomena. In the USA, an increasingly larger percentage of faculty no longer occupy tenured positions. Full-time faculty who are not eligible for tenure and part-time faculty make up about two-thirds of the academic staff. They tend to embed conflicting values and expectations as regards the functions of higher education and its staff directly into academe (Clark, 1997; Enders 2001a). Continuous employment as well as personal development in the sense of the traditional academic career model have become more insecure for a growing number of staff. Post-tenure review and experiments with “alternative” contracts are becoming more popular as well (Chait, 2002).

The fiscal constraints on higher education that hit many of the rich as well as the poor countries around the world also have had an impact on academic careers. With resources either stable or declining, change is expected to occur by substitution and concentration. This development affects the overall size and profile of the academic profession but also matters of faculty work load, time use, productivity and output. Academics are increasingly asked to take care of their own funding (Gumport, 1997; Altbach, 2000). And transition from bureaucratic control to market forces puts difficult choices on the agenda regarding what to keep and what to discard from traditional beliefs, norms and practices, as well as what to adopt and modify from the recent trends of modernization (Gumport, 1997; Trowler, 1998; Henkel, 2000).

The redefinition of higher education providers' traditional tasks and the inclusion of new ones are not easily integrated into the work roles and career practices of the contemporary academic profession. The search for societal and economic relevance in teaching and research challenges traditional norms and rewards based on principles of cognitive rationality and academic excellence. Technology transfer from universities to industry and other consumers of research was one of the demands that already surfaced in the 1960s and still persists. Priority setting to promote technologically promising scientific developments, attempts to forecast scientific breakthroughs with a strong application potential, and a general emphasis on "relevance" and "strategic research" are by now familiar phenomena (Irvine and Martin, 1984; Rip, 2004). More and more academics face a situation where they are kindly invited to move from a bounded world of academe to a project of academic career and work living in multiple worlds with blurring boundaries which encompasses a growing emphasis on the quasi-entrepreneurial role of academics (Henkel, 2000; Owen-Smith and Powell, 2001). We might argue that recent developments in academe are widening the institutional context in which academic careers unfold. They become even more boundaryless than in the past.

At the same time, several developments point to the observation that academic careers are becoming more bound to the organizational context as a locus of power and control. Traditionally the analysis of the university as an organization stressed the dominant role of the academics as the most important locus of power and control (Goodman, 1962; Cohen *et al.*, 1972; Weick, 1976). In this body of literature universities are marked out by certain peculiarities. Traditional universities are organizations for which goals are not only unclear but tend to be highly contested. They are "people processing" organizations using holistic, unclear, and non-routine technologies in teaching and research. High professionalism dominates the academic tasks carried out by highly fragmented professionals committed to their disciplines. They are "bottom-heavy" with low potency for collective action and weak organizational leadership. The academic professionals are those who act, rather than the university as an organization (Enders, 2002).

Since the 1980s one can observe a remarkable trend toward new role models for universities as organizations like the corporate model of universities (Bleiklie, 1994), the entrepreneurial model (Clark, 1998; Jacob *et al.*, 2003), enterprise model (Marginson and Considine, 2000), the service model (Tjeldvoll, 1997) and the stakeholder model (Jongbloed and Goedegebuure, 2001). They suggest that the process of transforming the university as an organization comprises policies and practices towards management models, aligning academics' activities more closely with the interests of their organization, and strengthening the role of universities' internal labor markets for academic careers. Attempts to fundamentally change the delivery of public services in universities are "adventurous" if new structures and their underlying values are (perceived as) inconsistent with prevailing values, beliefs and aspirations of the academic professionals. In principle, three views with respect to the consequences of such reforms towards academic work and career practices can be discerned, each of which is supported in the literature (Sehested, 2002; Kitchener, 2003).

First, recent developments lead to a serious diminution of academic values and practices: a "victory" of managerial values over professional ones. This view is not surprising as many reform advocates specifically see professionals as "part of the

problem” (Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003). They stress, for example, incentives for increased efficiency and cost effectiveness, new allocation processes based on customers’ needs, evaluations of performance partly based on non-academic criteria and corporate modes of governance. If such a transformation took place, reforms could be the start of a de-professionalization process. Indicators of such a process include the weakening of occupational closure, the reduced autonomy and the enhanced managerial control of professional work (Clarke and Newman 1997, Kitchener 2003). In such a context academics lose control over both the overall goals of their work practices and their technical tasks. Ultimately, some believe it could be the end of the profession (Ferlie *et al.*, 1996). It is clear that such a transformation is at odds with certain professional values and practices that govern academic careers. Academics are, among other things, traditionally characterized by an exceptional preoccupation and satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of the work itself and by a relatively self-regulated work organization.

Second, academic values survive the “attack” and continue to constitute the “moral order” of universities. There are several arguments supporting this view. Basic values and ideals of scholarship have survived many storms (e.g. Nisbet, 1971). While demands for reform were often “continual” and “intense”, professional values remained surprisingly robust (Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003). More recent history even shows that professional and bureaucratic regimes can coexist in a rather stable manner. Clarke and Newman’s (1997) “bureau-professionalism” serves as an example. It has the “continental model” as its equal in the area of higher education, where authority is distributed traditionally in a combination of professionals and state bureaucrats (Clark, 1983). Moreover, the academics’ positions may have changed but this does not automatically mean that their positions have weakened or that academic values have evaporated (e.g. de Boer, 2003). In new bargaining structures, such as management by contract, some academics could still be in the driver’s seat (Fitzgerald and Ferlie, 2000). Moreover, some aspects of reform, (e.g. those encouraging excellence) may in fact strengthen the position of academics with high reputations. The same logic may hold when “third-party money” becomes increasingly important.

The third view concerns the adaptation of traditional academic values that governed academic careers and work practices, in the sense that they blend with new values. Because in previous days professionalism and bureaucratization were often successfully intertwined, one could not exclude a “marriage” between professionalism and managerialism. This might result in an actual new “soft” monitoring of professional work and constraints on professionals’ autonomy, but with the professionals still in control and implementing a new form of self-policing (Sehested, 2002). An example of this view’s viability is the “entrepreneurial academic” (cf. Owen-Smith and Powell, 2001). These “new” academics exhibit interesting mixtures of entrepreneurial and traditional values. Newman (2001) speaks of more limited versions of professionalism with tighter controls over activities previously the province of professional judgment. Kitchener (2003) refers to a blurring of boundaries between managerial and professional rules. Professionals would “only” lose (some) control over goals and social purposes to which their work is put.

Implications and future research

In this paper we sought to increase our understanding of academic careers through an analysis of the (changing) multiple contexts governing academic careers and

academics' career practices. A neo-institutional framework for the analysis of careers in academe was provided. Careers in academe were conceptualized to reflect overlapping and possibly conflicting institutions belonging to the different social contexts in which academics act simultaneously.

Our main arguments first reflect the observation that certain traditional features of academic careers are due to their institutional embeddedness into the overall science system and their academic discipline. Second, academic careers are conditioned by national settings and their different cultural contexts. We exemplified these in order to better understand the variation of national models of formal and informal rules. Third, the changing organizational context of academic work was addressed to examine possible implications of apparent global trends towards marketization and managerialism on academic careers.

On the one hand, there is empirical evidence that academic careers are becoming more boundaryless. Various developments point into this direction, such as an increasing international mobility of faculty members, the growing use of part-time and adjunct staff, post-tenure review or the erosion of traditional concepts of tenure and experiments with alternative contracts. On the other hand, recent changes in universities point toward policies and practices that move from collegial or professional models of governance to management models. These seem to align academics' activities more closely with the interests and needs of their organization and subsequently strengthening the role of universities' internal labor markets for academic careers. Such trends may mean that academic careers also become more bound to their organization.

We limited discussion of the conceptual map to what might be called the objective face of the overlapping institutions governing academic careers. This makes international comparisons of the institutional contexts of academic careers an interesting field for further studies, particularly to extend and deepen our understanding of the specific formal and informal rules in academic careers. Furthermore, we need more macro-micro research to see how the structure and culture of a higher education system (Baruch and Hall, 2004) as well as the structure and culture of the disciplinary communities and specialities can be traced to the career experiences and practices of academics. Career researchers have formulated a growing need for an integrative view on objective and subjective careers (Barley, 1989; Harley *et al.*, 2004; Arthur *et al.*, forthcoming). Such an analysis of human agency within the institutional context would involve the investigation of academics' perception of, and knowledge about career-related social structures in academe as well as career-related motivations, aspirations and experiences. It would also take into account the relative positioning of academics in their social field (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, it is an empirical task to reconstruct the relative importance of rules and resources that shape academics' career actions (Barley and Tolbert, 1997) and how they differ between certain social settings. Equally important, cross-national and cross-organizational comparisons should provide further insights into the consequences of changing models for academic careers on academics' career experiences and practices.

Similarly, one could take up the interesting challenge of investigating into the micro-macro link of academic careers to see how the aggregate outcomes of individual actions can be traced to the overall performance of a given higher education system or organizational sub-setting. Research to now has primarily explored academic careers

in objective, structural terms and sometimes drawn far-reaching conclusions about the impact of career structures on the overall performance of higher education systems. Different authors have argued that the leading academic position of the US higher education system can, at least partly, be explained by a macro-structural analysis of its career system (Ben-David, 1971/1984; Sørensen, 1992; Enders, 1996). One thesis is that the composition of incentives given to academics by the science system, overall rules and regulations of labor markets within society, and the rules and regulations employed at the organizational level are less contradictory than in less-productive systems. Another is that the US system creates competitive environments that provide a specific mix of incentives for intra-career mobility and inter-organizational mobility that increases performance of academics. Whilst we have contributed to this debate, such studies still miss a micro-foundation for their macro-perspective. In this way, further career research along the lines above could produce a clearer picture of the impact on policies and practices that are in the making to change academic career models in order to enhance the overall performance of universities so that they can better serve the needs of our societies.

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