THE ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL IMPACT OF ACCOUNTABILITY ON ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALISM

Joseph Xhuxhi[i]
Lecturer in Education,
Faculty of Education,
Universidad Internacional de la Rioja,
Spain

Abstract:

This paper seeks to consider the impact of increased accountability on the professional identity of academics in British higher education and, consequently, the implications for academic professionalism. It explores and interrogates how the context of professional practice and the conditions of academic work are affected and changing. The manuscript discusses in detail the main challenges facing professionals in higher education and how the notions of trust, autonomy and academic freedom are contested and challenged. I argue that the widespread changes challenge the traditional notion of academic professionalism and result in both the de-professionalisation and the re-professionalisation of the academic. The concept of a new academic professionalism is examined, drawing upon perspectives from literature. I conclude by suggesting a twofold action: the rethinking and reshaping of accountability together with a redefinition of academic professionalism. The manuscript draws upon theoretical perspectives, the relevant literature and my own practical experience from my professional environment.

Keywords: accountability; professionalism; academic identity; academic freedom; audit culture; British higher education

1. Introduction

Increased accountability is dominating and changing academia. During the last 20 years, British higher education institutions and academics have experienced radical changes in all aspects of their work. Power (1997) pointed out that "*since the mid-1980s, a new theology of 'quality, efficiency and enterprise' has emerged in higher education.*" This observation has only grown more salient in subsequent decades, as universities worldwide have embraced managerial practices and audit culture (Craig *et al.*, 2014). Academics are now required to be far more accountable, and a whole new regime of policies, structures and

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[i] Correspondence: email joseph.xhuxhi@unir.net

practices has been introduced for this purpose. The heated debate that started in the early '90s, first stimulated by the 1991 White Paper (DES 1991) and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, continues in academia and raises many questions about the accountability discourse. What are the reasons for enforcing increased accountability? What is driving it? Accountability for whom and to whom? What are the positive and negative implications? What new power relations have emerged?

In the face of these questions, another critical issue emerges: how much agency individual academics retain in shaping their work and identity amid heightened accountability demands. The notion of academic, or teacher, agency refers to the capacity of educators to act purposefully and make meaningful choices within structural and cultural constraints (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). As this manuscript will illustrate, this capacity is both increasingly challenged and vitally important in the current climate of higher education. Indeed, recent literature on teacher and academic identity underscores that heightened accountability regimes can constrain educators' agency, even as they call upon educators to be more "*agentic*" in implementing changes (Buchanan, 2015; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013).

Increased accountability is a direct and inevitable consequence of the rise of the knowledge society, the coming of the globalisation era, the prevalence of neoliberal ideology, and perceived shortcomings of academia. The professional is no longer the exclusive possessor of knowledge. Students and other stakeholders in education demand transparency, and academics are expected to explain and justify their actions. The emergence of new managerialism and the decrease in government expenditure have shifted the emphasis onto economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Morley, 1999). The marketisation of higher education, treating students as customers, the worldwide competition between universities for students, and the growth of student "*entitlement culture*" – all favour tight accountability mechanisms and the continuous production of league tables, performance indicators and other measurement tools. Globalisation requires tighter control of higher education to promote harmonisation, dissemination, standardisation, interdependence and even imposition (Vidovich & Slee, 2001). The radical developments in UK higher education, particularly the transition from elite to mass higher education, the move from a binary to a unitary system, and the exponential growth of new modes of HE provision, have called for more rigorous accountability and quality assurance mechanisms to protect quality and standards. Low performance, poor value for public expenditure, failure to meet the needs of industry and commerce, and abuse of power provided justification for imposing a stricter accountability system.

The reasons, aims and objectives of accountability stated above seem contradictory, sometimes even incoherent; some are ethics-driven and others market-driven. Vidovich and Slee (2001) distinguish four main types of accountability: professional accountability to peers; democratic accountability to the general community; managerial accountability to governments; and market accountability to customers. I would add one more type or sub-type of managerial accountability, the accountability toward an institution's senior management, which is constantly increasing. Although all forms of accountability have increased, I agree with Vidovich and Slee's claim that there

is a shift from professional and democratic accountability towards managerial and market accountability. This shift has been noted internationally as well, with recent studies observing that university governance has been reoriented toward competitive metrics and top-down controls at the expense of collegial self-governance (Nakano *et al.*, 2021).

The new accountability regime has introduced several bodies and policies that have imposed new mechanisms for teaching and research accountability. In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act led to the establishment of the government-controlled Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) in England, Scotland and Wales. These bodies took under their auspices and institutionalised the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), first introduced in 1985. The HEFCs also formed Quality Assurance Committees (QACs) to conduct teaching quality assessments. Also in 1992, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), dominated by academics, was established to conduct institutional audits. The creation of all these committees and policies "*dramatically altered traditional notions of academic accountability,*" as Tritter (Morley, 1999) points out. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), set up in 1997 to combine subject reviews and institutional audits, was a further move towards rigorous and intensive accountability. Since then, these processes have only become more entrenched. The RAE evolved into the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the 2010s, adding even more detailed evaluations, including the assessment of research "*impact*", and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was introduced in 2017 to impose new measures of teaching quality. A new regulator, the Office for Students, now monitors universities in England with an explicit mandate to ensure transparency and value for students as consumers. Therefore, the accountability apparatus in British higher education has continually expanded in scope and intensity over the past decade and a half (Craig *et al.,* 2014).

2. The Changing Context of Academic Professional Practice

Increased accountability is changing and reconstructing the conditions of work and thought for academics and, importantly, has a significant impact on their professional identities. It is, no doubt, changing the university culture. New accountability practices facilitate new politics and forms of governance and professional behaviour. They dominate the way universities are structured and operate, creating what Power (1997) famously termed an "*audit society*" that is engaged in constant checking and verification, where "*a particular style of formalised accountability is the ruling principle.*" The whole organisation is reshaped so that it is "*auditable*" (Shore & Wright, 2000). Contemporary observers note that this audit explosion in universities has brought a host of performance metrics, rankings and surveillance techniques that can distort the priorities of higher education (Craig *et al.*, 2014). Accountability works through detailed control and monitoring of institutional and professional life. It changes the university environment by requiring and imposing certain procedures to be followed. Everything must be recorded in detail and in specified forms and formats. Minutes, notes and evidence of every decision and action are expected to be kept. Performance and productivity are

continually checked against specified targets that must be achieved. As Shore and Wright (2015) observed in revisiting the audit culture, higher education is increasingly reduced to a "*numbers game*," where what counts is what can be counted, often at the expense of deeper educational values.

This evolving context inevitably affects the agency of academics, the degree of control and initiative they can exercise in their professional roles. It is evident everywhere that the new accountability culture influences not just what academics do but also how much discretion they have in doing it. When university management emphasises measurable outputs above all else, academics often find their professional judgment second-guessed by audit criteria. The expanding regime of external evaluations, metrics, and oversight narrows the space for autonomous decision-making in teaching and research (Craig *et al.*, 2014).

3. Facilitating or Distorting the Aims of Professional Practice

The new accountability culture ostensibly aims at facilitating organisational development and the maintenance and enhancement of quality standards. Professionals are constantly inspected to maintain standards of good practice and improve quality, and are subjected to regular ranking and restructuring exercises. Phenomena such as second-rate teaching, poor research quality and productivity, wrong judgments, misuse of power, indifference and low performance that were, unfortunately, not rare in the past are now anticipated or detected and significantly reduced under tighter oversight. A lecturer at a university in London, England, although she agrees that accountability is a good protection mechanism against malpractice and underperformance, raises a practical concern: "*Some of us fear that our professional future is very much dependent on students' evaluations, and we are very reluctant to push students hard or be unpleasant to them, since this may result in bad evaluations.*" Onora O'Neill (2002) argues that increased accountability often obstructs the real purpose of the institution and the profession and that it is distorting the proper aims of professional practice. She claims that the new modes of accountability are "*internally incoherent,*" they "*invite compromises and evasions,*" provide "*incentives for arbitrary and unprofessional choices,*" and therefore undermine professional judgment. Indeed, I can justify O'Neill's claims based on my everyday experience; the academic professional today is faced with many new dilemmas. One may be tempted to publish prematurely or set an easier exam just to meet the requirements of a forthcoming audit. The paradox is that increased accountability appears to create some of the very same problems it was meant to prevent in the first place. This paradox underscores how accountability can undermine professional agency, incentivising compromised choices that conflict with core academic values (Buchanan, 2015). Recent analyses echo these concerns – importing private-sector style performance management into universities can lead to unintended and counterproductive outcomes (Craig *et al.*, 2014). For example, when scholarly worth is measured predominantly through metrics and rankings, educators might focus on "*gaming*" those metrics rather than pursuing innovative teaching or research (Craig *et al.*,

2014). In this way, an accountability system designed to improve quality can perversely end up distorting and narrowing academic practice.

Accountability in higher education appears, on the surface, to be a democratising discourse. It empowers the public and students and opposes elitism, secrecy and privilege. Delmer Dunn (2003) underlines that "*Accountability is the obligation owed by all public officials to the public, the ultimate sovereign in a democracy, for explanation and justification of their use of public office and the delegated powers….*" The wider community and all stakeholders of higher education can now exercise a more energetic role. Students' voices, expressed through a variety of mechanisms such as student feedback forms, surveys, student representatives in committees, etc., are now "*heard,*" leading to a redistribution of academic power. Authoritarianism that was often exercised by academics in more traditional settings is now minimized.

On the other side, we have a significant change in power relations. A lecturer in a public university in London noted: "*We very often feel that the student is too powerful and their opinion is valued very much to satisfy the customer. The joke among us academics is that if you want something to happen fast, ask the students to ask for it.*" The fact is that increased accountability brings a shift in power and creates a whole new set of power relations. Power is transferred away from rank-and-file academics to external bodies, governments and senior academic managers. Vidovich and Slee (2001) claim that students are only used as a rhetorical device, and Trow (Power 1997) suggests, exaggerating, that the British government has pushed accountability "*motivated more by its desire to control the academic community.*" Morley (2003) notes that accountability is value-laden since it privileges certain types of knowledge, pedagogies, outcomes and management processes over others. An audit process, although it appears to be an open and democratic process, relies upon hierarchical relationships and coercive practices (Shore & Wright, 2000). The relationship between the auditor and the audited is clearly a power relationship.

In such an environment, academics often experience a reduced scope for their own agency. Yet some do not simply acquiesce; they find subtle ways to assert influence within constraints. This echoes what Osborn *et al.* (1997) described as "*creative mediation,*" wherein educators exploit gaps in prescriptive policies to uphold sound teaching and learning practices beyond what is officially prescribed. Contemporary research also documents these micro-strategies of resistance and adaptation. Gonzales (2012), for example, notes that faculty members sometimes redefine their roles to preserve professional ideals even as metrics pressure them to change, and Hall and Ferris (2011) discuss how accountability demands can spur extra-role behaviours as educators try to reconcile external requirements with personal standards. In other words, academics continue to exercise a degree of agency by mediating accountability mandates, finding ways to meet formal criteria while still serving educational values.

4. Dividing Practice

Measurements, league tables and performance indicators now rank institutions and individuals against each other (Shore & Wright, 2000). This results in increased

stratification of the higher education sector, and the differences in status, prestige, employment conditions and power between different institutions and different academics are widening. As long ago as 2001, an OECD report argued (Nixon *et al.*, 2001) that "*it is no longer sensible to speak of a single academic profession*" and that "*a caste distinction is emerging between the 'have' and 'have not' groups.*" The academic workplace has fragmented into different groups of academics with diverging, even competing, interests, performing different tasks and enjoying different status and power. At the same time, more divisions have appeared through the creation of new quasi-academic roles such as "*academic managers*," "*quality assurance directors*," and other specialist positions that blur the line between faculty and administration. In the contemporary university, such hybrid or "*third space*" professionals (Whitchurch, 2012) play significant roles in management and compliance, often exacerbating the divide between those primarily engaged in teaching/research and those in administrative oversight.

But was the academic workplace previously a bastion of unity and equality? In past decades, many universities were dominated by strong hierarchical structures among academics that often were not based on objective or transparent criteria. What accountability has done is institutionalise certain divisions and set new rules for differentiation. Tight accountability regimes formalise distinctions by quantifying performance and assigning rewards or penalties accordingly. This can entrench a stratified system in which a minority of academics, often in top research universities or in leadership roles, secure most of the rewards, while others feel left behind. As a result, the inequalities within academia have become more systemically defined. Studies across different countries affirm this trend. For instance, between 2007 and 2017, faculty in Canadian universities reported an increase in evaluation demands and a shift of influence from faculty towards senior management (Nakano *et al.*, 2021). Such changes suggest that power and decision-making in academia are increasingly concentrated at the top, leaving individual lecturers and researchers with less autonomy over their work.

Morley (2003) points out another fragmentation that is aggravated by the new accountability regime, the fragmentation of the professional self. The academic is now split into multiple sub-identities – "*researcher*," "*teacher*," "*administrator*," "*entrepreneur*." The modern academic finds it very difficult to focus on any one area and pursue a single task effectively. He or she is expected to be highly specialised in one respect, in disciplinary research, for example, but at the same time perform successfully in a job that requires multi-skilling and constant role-switching. This juggling of roles can lead to stress and role conflict, as priorities compete. Contemporary discussions of academic work use terms like "*hyper-performativity*" to describe how academics must excel in every domain, often at personal cost (Stahl, 2015). The constant need to produce measurable outputs in teaching, research, fundraising, administration, and public outreach fragments one's professional focus.

A major negative consequence of increased accountability is the massive increase in bureaucracy, with academics being asked to prepare an ever-growing number of documents and fill in all kinds of forms to provide evidence for whatever is happening. They end up doing everything with the audit in mind. Academics today are expected to

perform a very time-consuming documentation activity that often seems to them far removed from genuine improvement of teaching or scholarship. Bureaucracy causes negativity, anxiety, distraction and distortion from proper professional practice, and it demoralises the academic professional. Empirical studies bear this out: the professionalisation of academic administration and the rise of paperwork have measurably increased academics' workload in recent years (Nakano *et al.*, 2021). One Canadian study found significant increases in the frequency of evaluations and reporting requirements over the decade ending in 2017, concluding that "*additional demands,*" often paper-based compliance tasks, were taking a toll on faculty time and morale (Nakano *et al.*, 2021). Bureaucratic overload not only wastes time but also constrains professional agency. When educators spend their energy on paperwork rather than on teaching or inquiry, their capacity to act on professional judgment and creativity is severely curtailed. In effect, the locus of initiative shifts from academics to spreadsheets and checklists.

5. Alienation of the Academic

The impact of the accountability culture on individuals and relationships is considered by many academics to be deeply alienating. The fact is that teaching, research and other aspects of academic work are no longer under the full ideological or intellectual control of the academic. Academics are, in a sense, policing themselves to follow the demands of audits and evaluations. Ball (2000) stated that "*the alienation of self is linked to the incipient 'madnesses of the requirements of performativity, the result, inauthentic practice and relationships.*" Morley (2003) added that performativity results in a process of impersonation, as the academic tries to represent themselves in a language prescribed by the auditing documentation. Academics are expected to perform in activities that often feel alien, and much of this work seems totally meaningless to them in terms of real intellectual or social value. This is profoundly demoralising and confusing for the academic professional. In other words, the academic experiences a loss of professional agency, being unable to act according to personal expertise or values, which contributes significantly to this demoralisation.

In the new accountability regime, the academic lives in a culture of constant and continuous inspection. Teaching quality assessment audits and research assessment exercises follow one another almost without pause. Semester after semester, the academic is put in the position of explaining and defending themselves regarding student evaluation forms, student-staff board meetings, examination papers and results, and learning and teaching methods. They feel under permanent surveillance. The feelings of fear, anxiety, stress and even shame are increasing in academia. The frequency, intensity and rigidity of the inspections help create this oppressive atmosphere. It is notable that no members of any other occupational group seem to be inspected as often or as intrusively as academics are now. The new accountability regime in higher education thus needs to make significant provisions for the protection and support of the academic, because the current climate can be psychologically damaging.

The atmosphere of fear and compliance under such incessant scrutiny leaves little room for professional agency or innovation. Under these conditions, academics often avoid taking pedagogical risks or pursuing unconventional ideas, focusing instead on satisfying the auditors' criteria (Buchanan, 2015). Research on educators' well-being confirms these trends. For example, a recent UK study argues that teachers' commitment and morale are being eroded by the impact of bureaucratic changes such as performance targets, increased workload, and heightened accountability demands – developments that in turn negatively affect their professional identity and mental health (Skinner, 2021). The same study found that loss of autonomy and the pressure of continual monitoring were dominant themes in teachers' narratives of work-related stress (Skinner, 2021). Although that study was conducted in school settings, its conclusions resonate strongly with what university academics report anecdotally, that excessive accountability can breed anxiety, burnout, and a sense of disillusionment with the profession. In short, the climate of continuous audit tends to undermine the very enthusiasm, curiosity and critical spirit that define academic work at its best.

6. Change in Employment Conditions

Nearly three decades ago, A. H. Halsey, in his influential work Decline of Donnish Dominion (1992), wrote that "*the don becomes increasingly a salaried or even a piece-work labourer in the service of an expanding middle class of administrators and technologists*." He described the proletarianization of academics through reductions in autonomy, in security of employment and in chances of promotion. Indeed, the accountability and audit regimes have clearly brought a change in employment stability for the academic professional. Tenure is more contested than ever. The fear of job loss has significantly increased, and job security has declined. A performativity culture means rewarding those who produce and perform, and "*punishing*" the others. Poor results in the REF or in a QAA audit can result in the closing or merging of a department, with serious consequences for the academics in it. Accountability pressures have also influenced policies, leading to more short-term and casual contracts. Academics on fixed-term contracts are made more accountable in the sense that their job retention can directly depend on hitting performance targets.

Pay and reward structures have likewise shifted to align with performance metrics. Merit pay and promotion are increasingly tied to quantified outputs, grants won, publications and student satisfaction scores. A minority of academics have managed to significantly increase their salaries as a result of excelling under the accountability regime, but at the same time, the majority have found that the real value of the academic salary has declined. Historically, an academic's salary was about four times that of an average worker's in 1929, but only 1.54 times greater in 1989 (Halsey, 1992). Today, that gap has arguably narrowed even further. In the UK, for example, the value of university staff pay has dropped around 17% in real terms since 2009, according to employers' own data (University and College Union, 2019). By some union estimates, staff pay suffered a decline of over 20% against inflation in the decade after 2009 (University and College

Union, 2019). This erosion of pay, combined with the rising use of short-term contracts and heavier workloads, means that many academics feel the conditions of their employment have deteriorated despite, or in some cases because of, the drive for greater accountability.

I would agree that academics lost much of the job security and non-performance-related pay increases that they had enjoyed in the past. But one might ask, should it have been this way in the first place? Should the academic professional feel that there is almost no way they will lose their job, regardless of performance? Is it not true that a guarantee of complete job security was sometimes a reason for low performance, bad teaching, or poor research in the past? Certainly, an academic should feel secure enough to practice their profession with integrity, but perhaps not so secure as to be entirely insulated from accountability for underperformance. The challenge is finding the balance. Under today's circumstances, however, many academics have become risk-averse. The precarious nature of their employment can discourage them from exercising agency; few will challenge directives or pursue unconventional ideas when job retention is perceived to hinge on meeting narrow performance metrics. This culture of precarity and continual evaluation can stifle the kind of bold, innovative thinking that academia has traditionally prised. Scholars have noted that younger or contingent faculty often "*keep their heads down*," focusing on safe, measurable achievements rather than experimentation, for fear of jeopardising their careers (Knights & Clarke, 2014). In this way, the changing employment conditions under accountability can have a chilling effect on academic creativity and voice.

6. Challenging Academic Professionalism

There is no singular definition of what constitutes professionalism, and the term "professionalism" has itself evolved. There is extensive literature variously describing and defining professionalism. Contemporary sociologists suggest that "*a profession is whatever people think it is at any particular time, and that can vary*" (Whitty, 2000). Nevertheless, we can find some common ground in defining the traditional or residual academic professionalism in terms of five features:
- It presupposes the mastery of specialized theoretical knowledge and some extended form of training in relevant skills.
- It is an occupation, and it provides a living.
- It is a self-regulated occupation with an ethical code of conduct. The primary allegiance of its members is to a professional body or to the standards of the discipline, rather than merely to an employer.
- It supposes an orientation towards the public good (e.g., commitment to educating society, advancing knowledge).
- It implies a degree of trust, autonomy and academic freedom.

However, as stated above, increased accountability has significantly changed the context and conditions of professional practice. It is evident that the professional identity of the academic is changing. A direct consequence of the new educational landscape is

that the basic defining characteristics of academic professionalism are being challenged. Trust, autonomy and academic freedom are all being questioned and curtailed under the new regime.

All these elements are closely intertwined with academic agency. When trust is low, or when autonomy and freedom are curtailed, the academic's capacity to act with professional judgment and initiative is likewise diminished (Lasky, 2005). Does accountability, with its control mechanisms, rules and regulations, and its audits and performance indicators, constitute a challenge to trust in the academic professional? As Douglas (Morley, 2003) pointed out, checking only becomes necessary in situations of mistrust. Are we facing a crisis of public trust in academics?

S. Groundwater-Smith and J. Sachs (2002) observed that today "*it is unlikely that people will take the risk of believing, at face value, either the bills presented to them or the services they are provided without requiring any form of accountability*." In other words, trust in professionals had already broken down even before the current wave of accountability was introduced. As stated above, one of the reasons for enforcing accountability was professional malpractices and critical incidents that resulted in the public trusting professionals less. There was a question of trust, and accountability was introduced in part to address it. But does accountability result in a culture of trust? Does it make academics more trustworthy? Are they trusted again? According to Shore and Wright (2000), trust is effectively being substituted by measurement. It appears that we trust the measures and not the professionals. Morley (2003) suggests that trust is not only not reinstated by these processes but is actually reduced; when the emphasis is on performance and performativity, nothing can be construed as authentic. I would agree that although accountability has increased the trust of the public, the students and other stakeholders in the processes and outcomes of higher education, we have no evidence to support any claim that trust in the professionals themselves has been fully reinstated.

Things are not the same in the U.K. as they once were. The accountability regime has existed for a long time now, and it is characterised by onerous and bureaucratic practices. It appears that such an increased accountability culture could even damage rather than repair trust. O'Neill (2002) is right to point out that current methods of accountability "*build a culture of suspicion, low morale, and may ultimately lead to professional cynicism, and then we would have grounds for public mistrust*." To reinstate trust in the academic professional, we need the right balance between accountability and trust. Trust cannot, and should not, mean "*blind faith*" in professionals. But a culture of constant audit may erode the goodwill and intrinsic motivations that form the basis of genuine trust. Interestingly, an ostensible paradox of the accountability culture is that although we do not fully trust the individual academic professional, we do trust the auditors, who are themselves academics drawn from the profession, to audit their peers. This paradox indicates that the academic profession is, at base, still trusted to know what good practice is. It would be a fatal assault on academic professionalism if audits were not carried out by peer professionals, which suggests that even accountability mechanisms rely on an underlying reservoir of professional trust.

A very negative and dangerous consequence of this culture of distrust, aggravated by increased accountability, is that by decreasing the credibility of the professional, it has weakened their claim to an independent moral voice on general social policy issues (Freidson, 2001). Traditionally, academics and other professionals have at times played the role of critic and conscience of society, speaking truth to power. Eroding the public's trust in academics makes it easier to dismiss academics' contributions to public debates. This affects democracy and the public good, since academic professionals have a history of questioning and contesting the ruling power for the good of the people.

7. Autonomy and Academic Freedom

There appears to be some confusion in academia about the terms autonomy and academic freedom, and how we define them. We can find definitions (Slaughter, cited in Vidovich & Currie, 1998) that closely relate academic freedom to both individual and institutional autonomy. Generally, the professional autonomy of the academic is closely associated with the notion of academic freedom. Nixon (2001) offers a traditional definition of academic freedom as the freedom of academic professionals "*to speak their own minds, to teach in accordance with their own interests, and to develop those interests according to their own research agenda.*" Academics have enjoyed and exercised a considerable degree of autonomy and freedom for centuries, and, as Morley (Morley 2003) states, they have long associated their academic identity with these liberties.

Today, however, many concerns are being raised in the academic community about the impacts of increased accountability on academic freedom. Do the existing policies and practices of accountability decrease academic freedom and autonomy? The evidence suggests that they very probably do, as is evident from all the implications for the conditions of academic work stated above. Academics cannot teach and conduct research in whatever way they absolutely choose, as they might have in earlier decades. Teaching autonomy is reduced through tight control over curricula, close monitoring of teaching quality, and the high value placed on standardised student evaluations. The purpose, nature and productivity of research are influenced by rigorous and continuous evaluations and other accountability measures. Barnett (1997) argued that "*academic freedom is not taken away; rather, the opportunities for its realisation are reduced.*" In his later work, Barnett (2000) went further, stating that academic freedom is "*attenuated,*" basing that claim on the fact that the Dearing Report (1997) on UK higher education allowed very little room for academic freedom compared with the Robbins Report in 1963.

But is the reduction of academic freedom a threat to academic professionalism? Perhaps it is a threat only to that version of professionalism that Nixon (2001) characterises as "*inward looking*" and "*self-referential.*" It is worth considering that the notion of academic freedom can be exploited by a "*favoured occupational group*" seeking to protect itself and its interests (Ramsden, 1998). Morley (2003) associates autonomy with an "*elite who can protect their boundaries*" and describes it as "*lack of vulnerability to others,*" "*a kind of solipsism,*" "*a lack of sociality.*" In other words, the traditional concept of academic autonomy and freedom allocated uncontested power to the academic professional and

could be misused. Nixon (2001) points out that "*academic freedom is, ultimately, a freedom for the academic.*" But what about other participants in higher education?

The other stakeholders of higher education are entitled to a more participative and energetic role. The freedom to learn is hampered if students cannot have a say and do not enjoy freedom in their educational experience. They are co-producers of knowledge and active participants in the process of learning. Students, too, like academics, need a form of freedom in the educational relationship. And what about colleagues, support staff, and the wider community? Should not their input influence research agendas and curriculum content in appropriate ways?

Accountability, at its best, offers a platform for a more even distribution of power and a dispersion of freedom in the academic community. It can democratise decision-making by forcing transparency and involving stakeholders. However, it should not simply replace autonomy in an otherwise authoritarian relationship, nor reduce academic freedom to a checklist. Increased accountability in practice has arguably moved too far towards bureaucratisation, and it may over-restrict the bounds within which academic freedom is exercised. Even in the relatively collegial systems of some European countries, scholars report that managerial reforms have required finding a balance: regulated autonomy that preserves some collegial decision-making even as external controls grow (Hansen *et al.*, 2019; Marini & Reale, 2016). While these reforms aim to ensure accountability, they also recognise that total suppression of academic voice would be counterproductive.

Although I count as a positive development the fact that the "traditional" notion of unchecked academic freedom is being questioned and broadened, breaking down an insular ivory tower, the concept of academic freedom should not be abandoned. It remains at the core of the mission of the university and is essential in teaching and research. The right and the obligation of the academic to use that freedom, to speak out on any issue for the public good, is very important for our society. Many academics feel that what is at stake is not just their personal prerogative, but the university's broader social role as a centre of independent thought and critique. For these academics, the encroachment of accountability translates into a direct loss of agency in both teaching and research; they can no longer pursue their intellectual interests as freely, but must conform to externally imposed objectives and evaluations. In theory, agency is achieved when individuals find creative and reflective ways to act within their context (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Priestley *et al.*, 2013). But a heavy accountability regime drastically narrows the space for such action. The challenge, then, is to carve out spaces of intellectual freedom and creativity within a system that demands justification and measurement. How academics and institutions respond to that challenge will shape the future meaning of academic professionalism.

8. Academic Professionalism: Is It Still There?

As is clear from the discussion in the preceding sections, the traditional notion of academic professionalism is in crisis. Some might use stronger, more polemical words,

saying "*it is under assault, under attack, under threat.*" Others would be very pessimistic and would even speak about the end of the profession as we knew it. Are things that bad? Is there a different, alternative angle for interpreting the new components of the academic profession and, therefore, acting accordingly? There is no doubt that the golden age of academic professionalism has long passed. Henkel (2000) points out that "*those who became academics in the 1980s and 1990s were joining a different profession from that of the 1960s and 1970s.*"

The traditional academic professionalism has indeed been contested and has declined in many respects. There has been a significant transfer of power from academics to other stakeholders of higher education and to managerial authorities. The academic profession is becoming an increasingly atomised, fragmented and divided profession. Academic professionals are divided from one another by task, by status, and by levels of power and influence. The fourfold professional identity, teacher, researcher, administrator, entrepreneur, of the academic is fragmenting their professional self and is very difficult to sustain. The bureaucratisation of the academic workplace is demoralising and alienating the academic professional, as we have seen.

The changed employment conditions are resulting in the academic profession increasingly becoming an insecure profession, an atomised profession, a part-time or precarious profession, essentially "*a harder working and lower paid*" profession for many. The traditional pillars of academic professionalism have been affected. Trust, autonomy and academic freedom have been reduced. Professional judgment is contested and possibly undermined. Judith Sachs (2001) states that under the accountability regime, a new model of professional identity is emerging. She names it the "*entrepreneurial identity*" and characterises it as individualistic, competitive, controlling and externally defined. We can certainly see aspects of this around us; academics are encouraged to act like entrepreneurs of their own labour, to cultivate personal brands, compete for funding, and align their work with institutional performance indicators. This entrepreneurial mode emphasises competition and compliance with external demands, leaving little room for the collective or moral dimensions of professionalism. It arguably represents a low-agency model of the academic, one defined more by targets and self-marketing than by collegiality or intrinsic scholarly values.

On the other hand, accountability has and can have positive effects on the profession, and it could be claimed that academic professionalism has declined only relative to criteria that are no longer the most appropriate ones. The academic professional is being challenged through new discourses to distinguish themself from a self-interested, self-protected, self-serving professional of the old school. The empowerment of other stakeholders of higher education and the facilitation of organisational development can promote the professional growth of academics in new ways. The academic profession is challenged to abandon mystification, elitism, maleness, male-dominated perspectives, secrecy, authoritarianism, egoism, and exploitation, all vices that arguably accompanied the old "*donnish*" professionalism.

At the same time, academics themselves are not merely passive recipients of these reforms. Many are seeking ways to reassert their professional agency, for instance, by

experimenting with new pedagogies, engaging in scholarly networks, or working collectively to sustain academic values in the face of external pressures. As Lasky (2005) suggested in a different context, when professionals form communities of practice and reflect on their core commitments, they can find creative ways to respond to reforms without losing their identity. We see this in faculty who adopt innovative teaching methods that satisfy assessment criteria and serve students' deeper learning, or researchers who find ways to fund critical inquiry by framing it in terms that attract support. These efforts show that academics are not simply being de-professionalised; many are actively re-professionalising themselves on their own terms, even if quietly.

Academic professionals today find themselves faced with contesting and contradictory discourses. Are recent reforms and changes leading towards the de-professionalisation or the re-professionalisation of the academic professional? The answer may be "*both*." I would count as a move towards de-professionalisation the fact that accountability is an imposition on the higher education community from external forces (government, market) and therefore violates the principle of self-regulation that professions traditionally claim. The displacement of professional judgment and independence of purpose, and the reduced possibility of the academic acting for the wider public good, all contribute to de-professionalisation. The removal of discretionary power in pedagogy and the bureaucratic overload in teaching practice are two features cited as de-professionalising in respective studies (Morley, 2003). The academic is increasingly transformed into a knowledge worker or even a technical functionary, some argue, rather than an autonomous scholar.

Morley (2003) observes a paradox that we have both de- and re-professionalisation occurring simultaneously. We have de-professionalisation when the academic is expected to accept being led, losing autonomy, and at the same time we have re-professionalisation when they are expected to operate managerially, gaining new skills and roles. One could ask: "*Isn't it a move towards re-professionalisation that accountability is aiming at – and partly succeeding in – enhancing quality, standards and performance of academics?*" Indeed, some aspects of accountability blur into genuine professional development. Accountability and professional development through bodies such as the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE, established in 2000, now part of Advance HE's fellowship scheme) can be seen as moves towards re-professionalisation. Ramsden (1998) was right to note that the academic profession is peculiar in that historically it had no prescribed period of specialised training for one of its most important functions, teaching. In recent years, universities have increasingly required new academics to undertake teacher training courses or obtain teaching qualifications, a clear professionalisation of the teaching role. Likewise, the intention to have more trustworthy professionals and the measures taken towards transparency, equity and equality could also be regarded as moves towards re-professionalisation. For example, requirements for ethical review of research, or equity training, are meant to uphold standards and public trust in the profession's integrity. These can be viewed as efforts to re-professionalise academics by holding them to explicit professional norms of conduct.

It is evident from the above that we could, perhaps, regard all recent developments due to increased accountability as both de- and re-professionalising the academic profession. Whether these changes lead to de-professionalisation or offer opportunities for re-professionalisation may depend on how much agency academics can exercise in navigating them. Studies indicate that when educators actively interpret, adapt and even resist certain reforms, rather than acting as passive implementers, they can mitigate negative impacts and even turn some accountability measures into opportunities for growth (Buchanan, 2015; Priestley *et al.*, 2013). In other words, the outcome is not predetermined; it matters greatly how academics respond, collectively and individually. If they respond by capitulating and complying without question, de-professionalisation is more likely. If they respond by asserting professional values, engaging with reforms critically, and finding ways to meet accountability goals on their own terms, then elements of re-professionalisation can emerge.

9. A New Professionalism

The accountability discourse clearly clashes with the conventional notion of professionalism in academia. We need an alternative conception of academic professionalism that will be compatible with the recent reforms and developments in the educational landscape, a new professionalism that can accommodate the right forms of accountability and will be open to the concerns and needs of the other stakeholders of higher education. In essence, this new professionalism must blend professional autonomy with public accountability, finding a synthesis between the values of the academy and the valid expectations of society.

The new professionalism should avoid both "*the professions and the state's forms of closure*" (Whitty, 2000), and it should not, of course, evolve into a "*hopelessly compromised professionalism*" (Nixon *et al.*, 2001). It should allow for a more regulated autonomy for the academic professional, enable a more participative role for the other educational stakeholders, and acknowledge that the academic should be accountable not only to his peers but to other stakeholders as well. This implies building structured forms of involving students and external parties in quality processes, but doing so in a way that does not undermine the expertise and ethical agency of academics.

One model that has been suggested is democratic professionalism (Australian Teachers' Union 1991; Apple 1996) as an alternative to both traditional insular professionalism and to state-controlled managerialism. Democratic professionalism recognises the need to facilitate the participation of other stakeholders of higher education in decision-making. It seeks to demystify professional work and build alliances between academic professionals and students, employers and the wider community. Under this model, professionals are expected "*to be responsible and accountable for that which is under their control*" (Sachs 2001), which suggests a shared responsibility rather than top-down compliance. Although there isn't an answer to what, exactly, is democratic professionalism, it provides a sound basis for a new concept of

professionalism. It points toward transparency, collaboration, and mutual accountability among academics and the public, rather than secrecy or unilateral control.

Building on this idea, Judith Sachs (2001) suggests the development of a new professionalism, the activist professionalism. She proposes the redefinition of professional identity as an activist identity, where the academic professional, through the development of communities of practice and the use of professional self-narratives, develops their professional and personal self in a reflective, politically aware manner. Activist professionalism recognises classroom-level responsibilities and also broader social and collegial involvement, and, most importantly, emphasises collective professional responsibilities (Walker, 2001). It envisions academics as change agents who actively engage in shaping the direction of education policy and practice, rather than simply carrying out mandates.

Activist professionalism is an inspiring idea for professional, personal and collective development. It explicitly foregrounds the educator's agency, encouraging academics to actively shape their practice and identity rather than simply accepting externally imposed roles. In this vision, academics would form networks or communities to support one another, share narratives of practice, and assert professional values in the face of managerial pressures. However, I find it extremely difficult and perhaps improbable that such communities of practice can be formed and sustained, and can interact with each other on a large, perhaps global, scale in the current climate. Melanie Walker and her colleagues (2001) formed such a group and experienced very positive outcomes, but again, that was just a single group in a specific context.

Still, the ethos behind Sachs's idea, a proactive, collective orientation to professionalism, remains highly relevant. It may be that activist professionalism will take different forms than those imagined in 2001. Today we see hints of it in, for example, movements among academics fighting for academic freedom or better working conditions or in cross-university teaching innovation communities such as the Europe's Civic University Alliance. These can be seen as contemporary efforts to reclaim professionalism collectively. This vision of professionalism, in any case, explicitly calls for academics to reclaim a sense of ownership over their work and its purposes, thereby re-empowering themselves as professionals.

Nixon *et al.* (2001) offer a different suggestion for a new academic professionalism, one that is based on an ethical shift towards the values "*of care and affection, of critical engagement and dialogue, of public concern and welfare*". This would be achieved, they argue, through a redefinition of academic purposes and practices in terms of a re-orientation of academic freedom as freedom for all, including students and the public, rather than just a privilege of academics. They suggest the democratisation and broadening of research, choosing research agendas with societal input, the privileging of student–teacher relationships and the widening of access in higher education, a commitment to professional self-development, the strengthening of collegiality, and the recognition and respect of disciplinary differences, avoiding one-size-fits-all management.

I find that Nixon *et al.*'s (2001) concept of new professionalism promotes democracy, recognises the role of the other stakeholders of higher education in the

learning process and in the production of knowledge, reserves a central role for teaching, and urges professional self-development. It offers, therefore, a sound basis for regenerating professionalism that, in my opinion, is not at odds with the right modes of accountability. In fact, Nixon's vision attempts to synthesize accountability with professional values; it acknowledges that academics should answer to society, but in ways that enhance rather than undermine their moral and intellectual commitments.

However, under the very complex conditions in which the academic professional is expected to profess today, I would like to highlight three things that I think every new notion of professionalism would require if it is to be compatible with the new era without "*surrendering*" to the state or the market. First, the academic professional should aim at coming as close as possible to Ron Barnett's (1997) idea of the "*critical being.*" This means incorporating a critical self (development and self-knowledge), critical knowledge (of pedagogy and one's specialised field) and critical action (constantly improving practice and its contexts). In other words, new professionalism must include reflective practice and a willingness to question one's own assumptions, as well as the system's.

Second, the professional should develop an "*individual moral independence*" and establish their own moral boundaries (Lord Phillips of Sudbury, 2002). This raises several painful and costly individual dilemmas, but this is what I would call the "*heart of professionalism.*" To be an academic, an educator, is a vocation, and it should be protected by all parties. Maintaining moral independence means that the academic holds on to core ethical principles, such as honesty in reporting results, fairness in grading, commitment to students' growth, even when there are external pressures to cut corners or to focus on appearances over substance. It means at times being willing to say "*no*" or to take a stand, even at personal cost.

Third, "*altruism and public service should remain high on our professional agenda*" (Whitty, 2000). This reminds us that the academic profession, at its best, is not only about personal career advancement or institutional rankings, but about serving society, through educating the next generation, through research that addresses real problems, and through being a thoughtful critic of society. Any new professionalism must reintegrate the idea that academics have a duty beyond themselves, a duty to truth, to students, and to the public good.

These three requirements, critical being, moral independence, and altruistic public service, are not easy to fulfil in the current climate. But they provide guideposts for navigating a path between unthinking compliance and total resistance. They suggest that the academic profession can be reconstituted in a way that engages with accountability while also upholding what makes it a profession.

10. Conclusion

Increased accountability has had significant effects on academic professionalism. The traditional notion of academic professionalism has declined in many respects. The professional identity of the academic is in crisis, as the academic profession faces a number of very important challenges. Are these good or bad developments? We are

experiencing a polarisation of opinions, reactions and suggestions, partly among academics themselves and mainly between academics on one side and governments or managers on the other.

I have argued that it is a matter of quantity and quality, how much accountability, and of what characteristics? How broad or narrow should our definitions of professionalism be? It is indubitable that current methods of increased accountability are having significant negative consequences not only on the academic professional but on all aspects of academia, and even their effectiveness and efficiency are being questioned. It may well be time to draw back on some of the excesses. At the same time, it is true that traditional academic professionalism carried a lot of vices, and it could not remain unchanged in a changing world. We should, therefore, rethink and reshape accountability and, on the other hand, redefine academic professionalism to suit contemporary needs.

Multiple accountabilities, as Vidovich and Slee (2001) rightly claim, are entirely appropriate for universities in a democratic society. But there are three things that we should take care of going forward. First, we likely need less accountability – or at least less onerous, ritualistic accountability. The sheer volume of audits and reports should be reduced to alleviate the bureaucratic burden on academics. Second, we need a refocusing of attention towards professional and democratic accountability so that the right balance is achieved. That means placing greater trust in peer review and professional norms (professional accountability) and in openness to students and society (democratic accountability), rather than relying predominantly on managerial and market mechanisms. Third, we need less bureaucracy. O'Neill's (2002) suggestion for "*intelligent accountability*" finds me in full agreement: more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control. In practical terms, this could mean simplifying quality assurance processes, emphasising outcomes over micromanaging processes, and using sampling or risk-based audits instead of blanket audits. It could also mean investing in building a culture of trust and professionalism so that not every action needs to be formally documented to be deemed real.

On the other hand, academic professionalism should be redefined, and a new professionalism should emerge to fit the demands of a new and different world. It should relate not only to the legitimate aspirations of the academic profession but also to those of the wider community and the other stakeholders of education (Whitty, 2000). "*The choice is not, as often presented, between the alienation of the ivory tower and the managerialism of the bureaucratically accountable institution*" (Nixon *et al.*, 2001). We need a new notion of professionalism that is compatible with the new discourses in higher education and that develops as a counterbalance to the prerogatives of the state and the market. The discussion for such a new professionalism, some thoughts and suggestions were presented in the preceding section, has started and needs to continue. There are signs, in various forums and experiments, of academics and policymakers attempting to define what a reinvigorated professionalism would look like in universities, one that combines accountability with autonomy, quality with trust, and external engagement with internal integrity.

Central to this ongoing discussion is the recognition of academic agency as a cornerstone of professionalism. If accountability mechanisms are to improve rather than impair higher education, they must enable academics to exercise informed, ethical judgment rather than simply compel them to comply with checklists. In essence, professionalising academia hinges on empowering educators as agents of change (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005). When academics have the agency to critically mediate policies and practices, they can uphold the core values of their profession while meeting legitimate accountability demands. Strengthening professional agency, therefore, is not only beneficial, it is essential for any sustainable new academic professionalism under the current accountability regime. This means involving academics in the design of accountability systems, encouraging professional reflexivity, and fostering an environment where academics feel a sense of ownership over quality improvements, rather than feeling that quality is something done to them by external forces.

In conclusion, the actual and potential impact of accountability on academic professionalism is a story of both loss and opportunity. We have lost some of the simplicity, trust and freedom of an earlier era, but we have opportunities to build a more inclusive, responsible and dynamic professionalism for the future. Achieving that will require thoughtful action, rethinking and reshaping accountability, and simultaneously redefining academic professionalism to emphasise agency, ethics, and engagement with society. The task is urgent and challenging, but the future of the academic profession depends on our response.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declarea no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Joseph Xhuxhi graduated from Imperial College London with a degree in Biology-specializing in Neuroscience- he has a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Science Education from the Institute of Education in London as well as a PGCE in Leading Innovation and Change in Education from the University of Saint Mary's in London. Joseph completed a master's degree in science education at the University College London. Currently Joseph is a Doctoral student in Education with the

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid - with a focus on STEM education and students of Special Educational Needs including students identified as Able, Gifted and Talented. Joseph has and maintains significant international Science teaching experience in secondary and primary state as well as private schools employing the Spanish, British and American curriculums. He is a member of the Research Group "Active Methodologies and Mastery Learning" at UNIR and a lecturer of Innovative teaching in Undergraduate degrees at UNIR. Joseph also maintains a strong interest in Initial Teacher Training as well as ongoing Teacher Professional Development, especially in the Balkan countries.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4450-4142

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