

Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning

Comment, Query, Critique

Academics' role on the future of higher education: Important but unrecognised





In whose hands, does the future of higher education lie?, Celestin Okoroji asks as a PhD student and answers as the following: “We cannot entrust the future of higher education to future academics, perhaps it should be students, or employers, or someone else, but whoever it is, it probably shouldn’t be us.” I think that problems in higher education largely come from unjust systems and thus, the solution should be systematic as well. Yet, I still believe that we as future academics who will teach younger generations have a great potential to light the fire by making our students more alert and assertive in challenging these long-existing problematic systems. Thus, in this blog post, I will try to show what we can do as future academics by having an activist mindset embedded in our scholarly identity.

What can we actually do?

There are numerous ways in which academics can work for the future of higher education. To list a few: We can scrutinise the curriculums we use to ensure that it does not systematically favours certain groups of people over others. Similarly, we can recognise the mental health problems of students and support them better. The effect of these problems is not particularly present for students. Academics also face comparable challenges that disrupt their efficiency both as a teacher and a researcher, which inhibit their career development. Thus, we could also create working groups or support groups to identify the struggles of disadvantaged academics and provide them with support accordingly. There are many other things that we can do but the important point here is that everything we do with an activist mindset could widen the horizons of future generations of students and inspire them for challenging the problematic issues they face in higher education.

A good example is shown by Sara Goldrick-Rab from the Temple University, who has started a “Scholar Activism” course and blogged the materials of it and the discussions from the classes to reach those outside of her class. Her posts demonstrate that even just discussing the issues in higher education can make students become more aware of the issues in higher education as well as the possibilities of overcoming these issues. For instance, student discussions from her class indicate that in order to employ an activist agenda, academics can directly touch on practical issues in their teaching and research that give strong implications for real-world problems, improve research and direct the public agenda by acknowledging substantial but ignored topics, and challenging unequal structures by taking the hard road with difficult choices. As Marginson (2014) suggests, this practice by Goldrick-Rab perhaps will improve the agency of students and so, produce better educational outcomes both in terms of teaching and student learning.



How to manage an activist mindset within academic workload

Adding an activist mindset into our teaching and research as full-time academics is not easy. Changing practices takes time and effort, which is why –for example– so many academics prefer not to change current curriculums they use for the courses they teach even though they agree that their materials are biased. At this point, Rockquemore’s five models to manage time for academia and activism may come in handy.

The first option is that you can limit all your works related to teaching and researching to nine months so that you can work on activism work during summer vacation. Secondly, you can work as an academic during the day and work as an activist by night and weekend. Another option is that you can reframe the definition of activism for yourself. By doing so, you can turn your existing academic activities into activism (such as encouraging minority students in your class to ask questions). You can deal with a particular problem at your university and focus on creation (i.e. problem solution) rather than critique (i.e. problem identification). Finally, you can choose one identity at a time and shift between scholar and activist identities. For example, you can strategically concentrate on your academic work till you get a permanent position and then, you can start your activist identity.

In addition to all these, however, there could also be another route, which is taken by lots of academics currently. That is, you can let your activist mindset direct your scholar identity, which basically means that you can research and teach what is most meaningful to you in terms of activism.



We are the future, one way or another

“... if we do not know what it is we are seeking to achieve with our educational arrangements and endeavours, we cannot make any decisions about the content that is most appropriate and the kind of relationships that are most conducive.” – Gert Biesta

Working patterns within academia does not give much opportunity for academics to develop a scholar-activist identity in higher education. Time spent and efforts made to achieve a fairer educational system at universities are not recognised by authorities to improve academic careers. On the other hand, these efforts do not necessarily result in actual changes, or at least do not bring out immediate outcomes. Therefore, it is a long and difficult process to endure for academics.

Of course, systematic problems can only be solved with systematic solutions but who will create these solutions is another question. We do not have to do everything. Yet, some academics are facing constant challenges because of their certain characteristics and they have to spend at least some of their research time fighting these challenges while others are doing nothing but their research and teaching without necessarily facing any problems. In the end, however, it is not our responsibility to change this unjust higher education system, it is our dream and purpose to change it.



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