Academic citizenship through the bundle of academic roles

Ester Fremstad and Kristin Ewins

Abstract

As academic developers and higher education researchers, we, the authors, have pondered why engaging in public discourse is often found to be difficult by academics and how we can conceptualise and help prepare for the role of academic citizen in general and in more discipline-specific terms. Rather than approaching citizenship as an extraordinary task or role for the academic, we find that it may be best understood and approached as integral to being a researcher and teacher. We use perspectives on the knowledge society and the concept of co-production of science and society to suggest some conceptual inroads for understanding what shape the task of academic citizenship might take.

Keywords: co-production of science and society; critical-constructive knowledge; agency; communities of discourse

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Universities are important civic institutions, central to our liberal democracy. And most, if not all, academics see their disciplines as important for the future of society—be it for the climate, democracy, equality, culture, health, technological or medical innovation, social improvement, or human self-understanding. But when making curriculum decisions, facing politically engaged students in the classroom or journalists searching for knowledge-based arguments for how the world's wicked problems may be tackled, they may hesitate, feel insecure about their role and mandate, and withdraw to the safety of 'objectivity' (Barnett, 2004; Fremstad, 2016). At the same time, their universities make grand claims for the societal contributions of their research and education. The University of Oslo wants to 'educate students with the knowledge, ability and willingness to create a better world,' Harvard 'to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society,' and

Oxford to 'provide a quality of education and experience which equips students with the values, skills and intellectual discipline that will enable them to make a positive contribution to society.' The University of Cape Town aims to 'offer a socially engaged curriculum to develop graduate attributes targeted at the self, the community and the world,' the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur 'to create, disseminate and translate knowledge in science, engineering and allied disciplines that will best serve the society' among other things by 'building bridges between the academia, industry and society.' At the University of Sydney, 'we will not be limited by what we know now; rather, we will encourage each other to explore further and imagine a better world,' while Tsinghua University in Beijing has 'dedicated itself to the fostering of students' all-round development, innovative thinking, global vision, and social responsibility, to train and prepare outstanding talents to contribute to the betterment of society, the nation and the world,' and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia sets out to 'train competent and socially responsible professionals.'[1]

As these statements show, universities also see themselves as important civic institutions. But what does that mean? And what does it imply for academic work, inside and beyond the university? As academic developers and higher education researchers, we, the authors, have pondered over why engaging in public discourse is often found to be difficult and how we can conceptualise and help prepare for the role of academic citizen in general and in more discipline-specific terms. Academic citizenship, as we approach it in this essay, entails both citizenship within and beyond the university, as well as the relationship between the two. Rather than approaching citizenship as an extraordinary task or role for the academic, we find that it may be best understood and approached as integral to being a researcher and teacher.

But first, let us sketch out the context. We find perspectives on the knowledge society and the concept of co-production of science and society particularly important and helpful for understanding the relationship between the university and society.

The knowledge society and co-production of science and society

The global notion of living in a 'knowledge society' puts immediate emphasis on

[1] These statements are taken from the official websites of the respective universities (see reference list).

the reciprocity between scientific knowledge and society, which highlights the imperatives of academic citizenship. There is no longer a one-way relation with the public as passive recipients of scientific knowledge provided by the academic community. Academic inquiry is no longer (understood as) a bounded world directed and propelled (only) by its internal norms and values. Research and knowledge production are always contextualised (Nowotny et al., 2001). In profound but sometimes subtle ways, science and society are inextricably intertwined and co-produced, in the sense suggested by the significant contributor to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Sheila Jasanoff (2004). The idiom of co-production of science and society captures 'the simultaneous processes through which modern societies form their epistemic and normative understandings of the world' (Jasanoff, n.d., para. 1). In her empirical work, Jasanoff has focused on life sciences and how the intersections between law, science, and technology shape both scientific discovery and public policy making.

The university, its disciplines, and individual academics have the potential to make substantial contributions to public meaning-making and will formation (Kalleberg, 2011), not as the exclusive and disconnected owners of expertise, but as participants in public discourse where the university becomes a site for educating future professionals and citizens. And this is, we find, the core of academic citizenship: contributing to knowledge-based discourse, to interpreting and making sense of the world, and constructing narratives and explanations for social, cultural, and natural phenomena, based on empirical evidence and logical reasoning. Academic citizenship includes contributing to shaping the lens through which larger social questions—from climate change to the impact of technology on social inequalities—are understood and approached. The engagement of academics in public discourse is crucial for a well-informed, critically thinking society. Conversely, societal and technological developments and values, and partaking in public discourse, contribute to shaping pursuits of new scientific knowledge.

Potentially, the university not only responds to social change, but proactively initiates it (Delanty, 2001). What this interaction entails for the institution and its members can be conceptualised as integrated in the institutional ethos of the university (Kalleberg, 2011) and as integral to research, teaching, and dissemination in specific disciplines (Fremstad, 2016). Although the forms academic citizenship takes may vary between disciplines, it is possible to conceptualise a generic role and responsibility of the academic. In fact, the sociologist of science, Ragnvald Kalleberg, has already done this for us.

A five-fold bundle of roles and responsibilities

Universities are multi-layered institutions, housing complex bundles of tasks and disciplines. Academics hold the interrelated roles of researcher, teacher, public intellectual, expert and member of the institution (Kalleberg, 2011).[2] This five-fold bundle of roles and responsibilities of a university academic can be untangled analytically, but to fully understand and conceptualise each role, we cannot reduce our exploration to one single role. While the tasks related to the role of public intellectual (i.e., 'translating knowledge and insights out of the academic specialty so that it becomes understandable and relevant for persons outside of the speciality' [Eliaeson & Kalleberg, 2008, p. 3]) are perhaps those most manifest for enacting academic citizenship, academic citizenship can and should be enacted through all the roles in the bundle.

To conceptualise academic citizenship, we find it useful to envision the bundle of roles as a whole, while remaining mindful of the particularities of its parts. Publishing articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals is an important task for any researcher; disseminating research-based knowledge and insights to a broader audience is, in most disciplines, a different genre. And, partaking in public debate to influence understanding, problem formulation, and meaning-making—even visioning potential futures—that is another activity entirely, one that can seem foreign and outside of the boundaries of the academic world. But, following the work of Eliaeson and Kalleberg (2008) and Kalleberg (2011), we believe that all these tasks are part of the academic's bundle of roles and responsibilities. Academics may be influenced by their own social engagement or that of their students when choosing what research questions to pursue or what perspectives to apply in their research (Fremstad, 2016). Although the roles in the bundle are often intertwined, it is still important to distinguish between them to prevent us from, for instance, assuming that publishing peer-reviewed articles and presenting at disciplinary conferences is the same as the translation and communication work required to partake in public discourse.

While engagement and societal contribution are often considered important elements of one's work as an academic, many struggle with how to draw what they

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[2] Kalleberg (2011) explicitly uses *academic citizenship* to refer to an academic's responsibility to contribute to the university as an institution. This includes taking on leadership responsibilities; speaking out if structures, cultures, or practices undermine the upholding of the purposes of the institution; living up to academic standards in one's work; and maintaining good relationships within the institution. These responsibilities are, of course, important; but, in this essay, we understand *academic citizenship* as academics' cultural and democratic obligations within and beyond the university walls.

feel is a crucial line between research-based knowledge and political opinion or ethical engagement, and they often feel left on their own with this challenge. In line with previous findings (Fremstad, 2016; Macfarlane, 2004), our sense is that the academics we meet in our practice often end up steering clear of moral values and ideas on how to improve society in their teaching and research, and feel unease when students raise political-practical questions or express value-based or political views in class. Of course, some academics bring these questions into the classroom, and some engage in public discourse; but others—despite feeling a responsibility and will to engage—are held back by unease and the anticipated stigma of politicising (and thereby presumably devaluing) their research and teaching.

A recent white paper published by the Norwegian government entitled *Academic Freedom of Expression* (NOU 2022:2, 2022) begins with a telling illustration of academics (literally) laying low in this way:

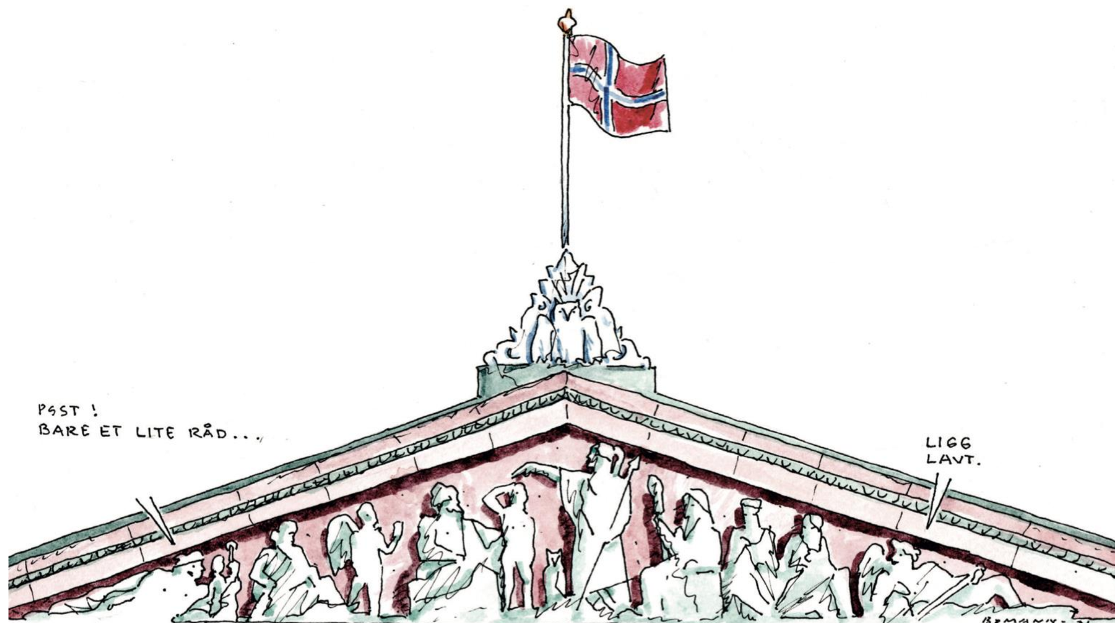

Figure 1. *The text reads: (to the left) 'Psst! Just a little advice ...' and (to the right) 'Lay low.'*

Note. Image reproduced with permission from illustrator Tor Bomann-Larsen.

The caricature summarises the white paper's picture of a culture adverse to academic citizenship. The problem is not a new one. The notion of the ivory tower, of higher learning as distinct from regular society, has as long a history as the university itself. In a similar vein, Eliaeson and Kalleberg (2008) identify 'strong tendencies in contemporary academia predominantly to think about academics as

scientists and teachers within specialized organisations, not also as intellectuals [in the public sphere]' (p. 7). The conclusion of the white paper is to welcome the academic citizen as an important figure in society; with the recommendation that members of the academic community use their knowledge to act as citizens in the larger public sphere without being discredited, without their claims being viewed as subjective, value-infected, merely political opinion or pseudo-science, and their persons as activist or attention-seeking (NOU 2022:2, 2022).

Based on the backdrop that we have sketched—of the knowledge society and co-production of science and society, which have challenged the notion of scientific knowledge as value neutral; and of the academic as potentially holding and enacting academic citizenship through a bundle of roles—we find the following three premises central when conceptualising how to approach academic citizenship:

1. The cognitive shift in social theory, ethics, and science that has opened up for a critical engagement with normative questions as important part of academic work.
2. The concept of critical-constructive knowledge and knowledge production.
3. The need for both collective and individual agency.

The cognitive shift and the cultural residue of objectivity

Some of the reluctance of academics to engage in public debate seems to hinge on the common—albeit most often tacit—cultural residue of value neutrality (Barnett, 2004; Kalleberg, 2009). It may be helpful, therefore, to remind ourselves that assumptions based on an understanding of knowledge as value neutral may be rooted in the non-cognitivism of logical positivism, which holds that 'normative claims […] cannot be defended, modified and rejected with reason' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 251).

The cognitivist shift in social theory, ethics, and theories of science in the latter part of the twentieth century has been persuasive. It has changed the tenor of discourse on normative questions, which now too can be addressed with reason and arguments. There is, however, still a strong tendency—both within and outside of the academy—to maintain a non-cognitivist view of the normative and an objectivist understanding of research. Whether implicit or explicit, such presuppositions can make it feel uncomfortable or inappropriate to engage in public debate or to deal with normative or value-laden questions as a researcher or teacher within higher education. It may, for instance, be considered within the proper remit

of one's field to teach the complex mechanics of AI without raising unsettling questions about the consequences of deepfake media to democratic values. Or, to explore, teach, and disseminate the possibilities of biotechnology without addressing their inherent ethical dilemmas. Or, to pursue research and teach social and gender inequality or racism without critically addressing their unjustness, and without seeking to understand their social history and material effects.

But, one might object, shouldn't research and teaching be objective, not value-laden and normative? To begin to answer such questions with a sensitivity to both epistemic and civic values, we would like to turn to Kalleberg's (2009) concept of the critical-constructive researcher.

Critical-constructive knowledge

Kalleberg (2009) argues that there are three different types of research questions that need to be addressed in order for the social sciences to contribute to academic citizenship: constative, critical, and constructive. While Kalleberg develops this argument for the social sciences, we find these categories useful for reflecting on the normative dimensions of knowledge production in a much wider range of fields.

The answers to *constative questions* describe and explain the phenomenon in question while *critical questions* 'open up for the evaluation of phenomena according to different value standards and norms, for instance having to do with justice, equality, ecological sustainability, health, efficiency, economic growth, human rights, or good conduct in science' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 264). When asking critical questions, the researcher uses well-established sources for setting the value standards, such as national and international law or the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. When formulating and answering evaluative, critical questions, it is essential to state the applied value standards explicitly, so that others can examine, discuss, and take their own stand on any normative statements, reflections, and conclusions.

The third type is *constructive questions*. The aim of these questions is 'to make it possible to specify feasible alternatives and argue why they are desirable' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 266). Research output from all three types of questions can 'become important input in broad democratic processes of opinion- and will-formations' (p. 266), as well as political decision making. Dramatic developments in technology, for instance, have triggered even the most hardcore scientists to ask critical and constructive questions about their own work. A case in point is the open letter to 'Pause giant AI experiments', signed by a prestigious string of ivy-league

university professors alongside powerful heads of industry (Future of Life Institute, 2023). The purpose of the letter is to persuade the global community of researchers to pause advanced AI research projects because, they claim, 'AI systems with human-competitive intelligence can pose profound risks to society and humanity' (Future of Life Institute, 2023, para. 1). Whether the worry behind the call is justified or not, it provides a high-profile example (from a field that bases its work on numbers and logic) of academics raising critical, value-based questions. And, by doing so, they commit to the full range of their bundle of roles as researchers, teachers, public intellectuals, experts, and members of their institutions.

Agency and ongoing communities of discourse

To expand our understanding of such critical-constructive explorations of possible futures, we would like to bring Emirbayer and Mische's (2018) notion of agency to the table. This is a concept that we have found fruitful in previous research to shed analytical light on how university teachers approach and conceive of teaching for social responsibility (Fremstad, 2021) and on how academic developers can conceive of and approach their critical-constructive potential (Fremstad & Ewins, 2023). This notion of agency has three elements:

1. the iterational element: a 'selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action'
2. the projective element: a creative reconfiguration of 'received structures of thought and action' based on 'actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future'
3. the practical-evaluative element: deciding between possible actions on the basis of critically and constructively combining selected received patterns of thought and creative projections of future possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971)

We find this notion of agency useful to further conceptualise what it could mean to enact academic citizenship. Constituted in the intersection between past, present, and future, agency—like academic citizenship—relies on the shared knowledge base of the discipline, as well as on normative and value-based questions underpinning both practical-evaluative and projective capacities. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) build on the Aristotelian notion of praxis, which includes emotional and moral, as well as cognitive engagement, and which relies on participation in an ongoing community of discourse. This means that although agency is lived out by

individuals, it is reliant on the collective. The 'ongoing community of discourse' is embedded in specific structural and cultural—and in the case of academics, disciplinary or professional—contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 995). It 'includes cognitive, moral as well as emotional engagement with the specifics of the situation' and 'a conscious searching consideration of how best to respond to situational contingencies in light of broader goals, projects, and purposes' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 998–99).

We find that this temporal concept of agency sheds important light on what it means to enact academic citizenship, supplementing it with an articulate temporal dimension, which also underscores the temporality of critical-constructive research. Also, this notion of agency draws attention to the fact that we always find ourselves within a structure, and that we are influenced by 'past patterns of thought and action' in all that we do (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). It goes on to argue that, at the same time, we are able and obliged to influence both structures and patterns of thought and action, and that this requires not only individual and cognitive, but also collective and emotional engagement.

What does academic citizenship mean in your discipline?

Building on and combining literature on science and society, conceptualisations of the bundle of academic roles, of different forms of research questions, and a temporal concept of agency, we have proposed a generic notion of academic citizenship, which is

- integral to all roles in the bundle (researcher, teacher, disseminator, participant in public debate, and member of the institution), but which highlights the importance of taking part in discussions outside of the university;
- explicit about academic citizenship including normative inquiry and deliberation;
- dependent on individual, but also collective agency, which includes not only cognitive but also ongoing emotional and moral engagement in ongoing communities of discourse.

But, academic citizenship cannot be understood as separate from the discipline. Discipline-specific approaches to research and the shared knowledge base of a field (the iterative element of agency) is crucial for academic citizenship. The influence

of one's discipline or profession on how the world is understood and on institutional, collective, and individual practices have specific meanings for the kind of practical-evaluative choices an academic can make in terms of research questions and dissemination—and on their ability to imagine potential futures.

We believe that the task of being an academic citizen is both crucial and urgent. Our hope with this paper has been to suggest some conceptual inroads for understanding what shape such a task might take.

Author biographies

Ester Fremstad is Senior Adviser and Academic Developer at LINK – Centre for Learning, Innovation and Academic Development at the University of Oslo. She has published on academic development and teaching and learning in higher education.

Kristin Ewins is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Academic Development at Örebro University. She has published on academic development and leadership in higher education.

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