Reimagining academic citizenship: Challenges, prospects, and responsibilities

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Introduction

The notion of academic citizenship is intertwined with *values*: the values that guide our actions as colleagues within the university and as educators, experts, critics, problem-solvers, and creators of projects that promise constructive and beneficial outcomes to culture and society at large.

With this special issue, we aim to create a collection of thought-provoking essays about how these complexities shape contemporary academia and academics, as well as how academic practices themselves are constitutive of the complex dynamics and expectations academics face. This implies many additional questions, such as who qualifies as an academic citizen, what society one is a citizen of, and how the notions of "academic", "society", and "citizens" relate. Rather than providing definitive answers to any of these questions, the contributions to this special issue engage in an active discussion, approaching the issues at stake from diverse perspectives and contributing new questions to the debate. The essays in this collection are relatively free in format, allowing different voices, styles, and academics from diverse backgrounds to shape the conversations about these issues that are at the core of our everyday working life.

Under the aegis of the Danish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education (DUN) and the special interest group (SIG) Higher Education

Policy and Practice (HEPP), we have, over the past few years, conducted a series of seminars where we have invited various colleagues to engage in discussions surrounding the concept of academic citizenship. Our aim has been to map and investigate the various perspectives on academic citizenship that are currently circulating. The investigations encompassed multiple scales, ranging from inquiries into the role of academics within the broader society, societal expectations of researchers, to examining the nature of the university as a society in itself, alongside more critical perspectives on academic citizenship as a mode of creating docile and governable bodies in the "machine" of neoliberal governance. We have also delved into academic citizenship as an ideal of democratic practice, asking questions about how we can act as empowering and supportive members, or citizens, within this internal academic community.

Consequently, academic citizenship is both highly tangible and deeply abstract. It pertains to academics' personal actions in countless concrete situations involving students, colleagues, administration, and all kinds of "publics". It also refers to an idealist philosophical framework rooted in Enlightenment thinking, extending from the autonomous citizens of Humboldt's university to Max Weber's idealised bureaucrat, and further to the "critical learners" of various educational reform movements and theories. In 1981, one significant proponent of critical higher education pedagogy, Knud Illeris, referring to the purpose of higher education, wrote: '...a reworking of the societal understanding that can result in the development of new psycho-social structures, linking a more accurate societal understanding with a purposeful capacity for action' (Illeris, 1981, p. 115, our translation from Danish). Interestingly, Illeris here referred to this as 'counter-qualification', although wrapped up in radical and socio-psychological discourse, it invoked education and citizenship's link to *Mündigkeit* and agency. This notion of academic citizenship, that is, the capacity to stand up and make your own judgement, often against authorities, conceived as both a right and an obligation, is still very much a central aspect cutting across otherwise different discourses on academic citizenship.

Academic citizenship is enacted and constructed at all levels from the confines of the classroom, in mentorship roles and supervision, in administration and leadership, and in interactions of all sorts with societal actors and audiences. We can discuss it as relating to something constitutional, that is, how does the university secure its scholars, students, and staff, the possibility of taking on the role of a "citizen", and/or how do government and society regulate higher education sectors undermining or supporting the possibility of citizenship? Another dimension concerns how academic citizenship is practised in contemporary higher education pedagogy. How do factors such as governing by learning objectives,

labour market orientation, institutionalisation, and, notably, depoliticised pedagogies of learning shape the Gestalt of citizenship within pedagogy? How does it relate to transformative agendas like climate action, diversity, security, safety, and equality? And to what extent do these novel agendas speak back to, and reshape, previous notions of academic citizenship?

Is academic citizenship a form of counter-qualification, as Illeris suggested, wherein educators support students' autonomy against or in conjunction with learning objectives, challenging the *machine* in the spirit of critical theory to foster empowerment and transformative societal action? Or does the notion of citizenship, for both the university and its constituents–students and teachers alike–belong to a bygone era, perhaps unattainable and even undesirable? In light of these considerations, how might we reconceptualise the pedagogical relationship within the university, maybe post-citizenship?

The various meanings of academic citizenship

In several ways, the notion of academic citizenship is rooted in the Germanic *Bildung* tradition, as for example in Humboldt (2018) and in Klafki's (2005) interpretation in the 20th Century, with the understanding of (higher) education as the inextricable link between knowledge, learning, and moral formation. In this view, going through higher education would prepare the individual in a critical-constructive way to participate in, to critically reflect on, and to develop the wider societal and cultural contexts surrounding the university. At the heart of the notion of academic citizenship, in the *Bildung* tradition, are the interconnections between the individual and the collective, the intellectual and the moral, and knowledge and its societal and cultural contexts. However, perhaps the strongest recent impetus has come from the work of Macfarlane (2007) and its focus specifically on contemporary meanings, responsibilities, and practices of "academic citizenship". Macfarlane argues that the sense of service and a collective and shared responsibility, even solidarity, for institutional culture and climate have been severely challenged, if not lost altogether, in the individualised, competition-driven, and hierarchical neoliberal university. To create cohesion and community between staff members, and between staff, students, administrators, and leaders in our universities, Macfarlane argues that there must be a renewed attention given to not only production outcomes, students enrolment numbers, and rankings, but to the development and thriving of academic virtues such as engagement, guardianship, loyalty, collegiality, and benevolence. Hence, there is a need for critical care for process, rather than only products, and for cohesion and collaboration, rather than

only individual prestige. A kindred Aristotelian approach is seen in Nixon's work (2008), where the virtues of academic practices are seen as not only what enables the intellectual-moral formation and growth of the individual but what, through the universities, constitutes a democratic "buffer zone" between the private interests of individuals and the governance of the state. Here, academic citizenship aims, ultimately, to sustain and further the public good (Nixon, 2012).

In the work of Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016; 2018), the focus on academic citizenship, through their concept of the "citizen-scholar", has moved beyond the institutional realm of the university and is being placed within societal contexts. They argue that the responsibilities of universities are not only dealt with through the higher education curriculum and virtue/value-formation processes, but instead extend thoroughly into forms of societal and civic engagement. By changing focus from "academic citizenship" to the "citizen-scholar" and, thus, placing the focus on citizenship rather than the academic, the concept suddenly flips and gives us a theory of the academic being anchored in society and culture, first and foremost, and having social responsibilities to tackle as the point of departure for thought, research, and study. A kindred argument is offered by Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016; 2018), albeit from an ontological-spatial approach. Here, we find universities moored to the world through their "placefulness", their socio-ontological contextual anchorings in society and culture. The authors argue that to be and become an academic—and a university more widely—is inescapably and ontologically linked to the "there" ("Da") of the place. Seen this way, universities and academics are never really societally or worldly remote or distant but are always in-the-world, even though this "worldhood" of the university and its members may not correlate one-to-one and align with the political world or the society defined in terms of workforce and economy. Academic citizenship, in this way, holds wide and far-reaching potential, moving greatly beyond the socio-economic confines. It also specifically highlights the intimate relationship of the notion of academic citizenship with that of imagined *publics*. To be a citizen implies to be in and be responsive to a society and its diverse communities.

In Barnett's (2018) theory of the ecological university, the notion of academic citizenship becomes multi-dimensional and "supercomplex". Barnett argues that there are no ultimately true or privileged understandings of societal responsibilities of universities and their members, and the concept of academic citizenship should always be plural (and pluralistic) as we, as academics, belong to and participate in multiple co-existent publics and hold not only one but a complementarity of citizenships. Barnett's post-structural understanding of academic citizenship and societal responsibilities of universities opens for both a diversity of meanings of citizenship and a self-critical dimension entailing several,

perhaps discomforting, questions: what citizens? whose society? The latter strand of thinking has taken its own turn in recent philosophical and theoretical research into academic citizenship, linking the concept to discussions of epistemic and social justice in universities and society more widely, both in book-form (Davids, 2023; Davids & Waghid, 2021), and in two recent journal special issues on academic activism (Dakka, Morini, & Boehm, 2022; Nørgård & Bengtsen, 2021). In these works, authors have questioned and critically discussed what power dynamics of inequality and injustice are being reproduced and negatively sustained through current ways universities are financed and politically supported. They also discuss who gains access to higher education (gender, social group, social background, ethnicity, age) and, thereby, who are granted academic citizenship. On an even deeper theoretical level, this literature questions and critically examines the very foundations of the (Western) traditionally upheld and celebrated enlightenment ideas of democracy, equality, criticality, autonomy, and dignity. As argued by Nørgård and Bengtsen (2021), academic citizenship and societal responsibility should not be based on concepts that foreground commonalities but, on the contrary, difference, diversity, and otherness. And as argued by Davids (2023), the very notion of academic citizenship, to be meaningful today, has to continuously critically challenge and contest itself, and may only find meaning in its enduring conceptual frailty and values of vulnerability, interdependence, and solidarity.

In a slightly different strand of the literature, STS (Science & Technology Studies) scholars have also devoted ample attention to academic citizenship, focusing on similar topics in different vocabularies and on different topics. Prominently figured in STS conversations on academic citizenship is the notion of culture being composed of multiple realms that coexist and mutually shape each other. These include academic cultures, teaching cultures, research cultures, and epistemic cultures (Felt, 2009). In addition, all these cultures are intersected by external forces such as funding, evaluation regimes, reforms and regulations, political and public expectations, and prevailing management practices at higher education institutions (Sørensen, 2023). Academic citizenship then concerns living in all these cultures at once, managing and balancing demands, expectations, affordances, and external forces to act in the interest of the collective and in alignment with the norms and values inherent within the various cultures. While this work has prominently focused on the challenges created by external influences, amongst others changing academic evaluation regimes (Robinson-Garcia et al., 2023), this strand of literature has also prominently discussed the interactions between academics and society, asking, for example, not only about the role of science in society, but also about the role of society in science (Felt & Fochler, 2008).

The essays in the special issue

So, what are the problems, what are the stakes, as reflected in the essays in this special issue?

The overarching concepts working in most papers, the grounding hypotheticals, the proscriptive tools, are democracy, justice, rights, and ever-increasing global civility; that towards which we should continuously strive, to which institutions such as the university can play an important part. Fundamentally, in this varied collection, ideas of democracy, justice, rights, and civility are just as important as "truth", "method", and "the best way" to solve problems. We might say that ideas of academic citizenship intertwine with grand ideas or narratives of democracy, justice, civility, truth, the planet, and the universe; they are maybe even each other's *sine qua non*?

It might seem that the university is disorientated and lacks a common ground. Differentiation and specialisation long ago eroded the romantic community of scholars and students in its Humboldtian sense. This means that it is problematic in itself to speak about "the University" as though there is one such thing. Yet, scholars, academic developers, leaders, and students, from all sorts of disciplinary perspectives insist on referring to the university as a proscriptive, hopeful concept following Latour (2016) in trying to 'imagine how this very special institution that we call the university could in some ways help us to land somewhere' (p. 1), that is, help us reconstruct, reorient our perspectives and efforts in thinking about the university as contributing to finding common ground. This we can think about as the ultimate search for the civility implied in the *Bildung* tradition, for the project of formation and communication in a fundamentally ethical sense, caring for humans, nature, and the planet as a whole. The problems are many and the stakes are high.

Despite speaking about the university and the collective singular "we scholars, students, academic developers, leaders, and administrators" in what could sound like idealist terms, we can read the collectivising concepts and the community, the "we", that many of the essays imply as: The university is realised in small steps, in studying, in creating communities of research, in small enactments, in making new modest policy changes, in *helping* each other *become*, in solidarity. This is when the university appears to us as the project that it is. With Tim Ingold (2018, p. 37), we can call this a 'minor key' perspective which takes experience, meaning-making, and community-building as its anthropology. The minor key perspective turns the tables on the institution: the university as an institution is a function, an outcome, of communities. As guest editors of this special issue, we become struck when the essays in the issue portray the disturbing view of

the radical difference between what the university becomes when entered as an institution, or when approached as a site for political and social activism, or as a processual *commoning* happening in seminar rooms, in supervision meetings, in scholarly societies, or when people meet at the coffee machine.

Glancing at the ideational history of the project of modern academic citizenship and at the essays in this issue, it is impossible not to notice how acceleration, communication technologies, and an omnivorous, expanding ideology of use and improvement have shaken the stabilities of the institution and its self-confidence. The university is put to work for shifting publics and shifting ideas of the common good, locally, regionally, and globally. All sides share in the ideology of putting universities to use whether it is for economic growth, for local and global social justice, or for the struggle against climate change. What this development has made painstakingly clear is that the relation between "the academic citizen" and "the public" she refers to is at best unclear but possibly in total disarray. Do "we" refer to a global modelling of apocalyptic climatic change and to new social justice orders which calls on us to rearrange the university, its modes of scholarly work, and our role in it immediately, and, if so, what about the millions of people who believe they live in a society taken over by a cosmopolitan elite springing from universities that invent problems for their own dark benefits? The public and "the we" of universities are in trouble. The "thing" is simply not there in an apriorist sense, but the work is going on from many different perspectives, in many different arenas. Some essays take the university as a workplace, others as a territory to be challenged or even opposed, and others again consider the university in the context of the digital media revolution.

The essays are travelling in many different directions and explore different understandings, critical perspectives, and conceptual pathways. Some are nomadic, advocating to leave the territorial university and its statist concepts behind because they exclude; they draw up boundaries between what is in and what is out. In such perspectives, universities police properties and identities. Here, the university is conservative or even reactionary. It promotes elites, it favours certain cultures and certain modes of communication, it overlooks civil bonds and invisible work, and it silences alternatives; in effect, it works against the expansion of the solidarity that many of the essays search for. Institutionally, this is evidenced by rankings, funding disparities, elite journals, lack of inclusion, and not the least, structures for hiring, tenure, and promotion. Several essays reopen the promise of the university as an idea that can lead us towards renewed notions of academic citizenship and renewed notions of publics. Despite its troubled legacies, the university is in these papers still a dream of increased wholeness which can and should be expanded endlessly. In this view, the academic citizen is a person who takes care of the world without

fantasising about success, rewards, or even ends because there is no end to the project; the never-ending project of curious and loving engagement with "being" in an ever-expanding search for common ground. In some essays, the maximal scale might be small. How do I find that open, caring, character in my relations, that attitude, here and now, in this particular situation when we in this meeting, right here, talk about how to be academics with opinions about social change or when we give feedback to a doctoral student's first work? Or, when we empty the department's dishwasher, refill the coffee machine, and embrace the insecurities, anxieties, and out-of-place feelings that many of us carry within.

Several of the authors point towards key challenges, and even paradoxes arising, for universities and their societal contexts to tackle in the time to come. This includes the heavy focus on instrumentality in the university of today, a focus on working towards impactful outcomes, while at the same time there is a widespread experience that too little is done towards fixing the world's problems, to the deep frustration of many of the essays' authors. There is too much evaluation and security in today's university, with an intention to and/or the consequence of a high degree of controlled and secure outcomes of our work and controlled futures of our students in terms of jobs and incomes. At the same time, there is also too little security in the sense of how to acknowledge grief, anxiety, anger, and bewilderment, at all levels. We have too much wholeness, the climate tipping point timeline is ticking over our heads; deeply felt by many university students today. It raises the question, how to take care of that, as an academic citizen? We know so much about the global connectedness of inequality, injustice, war, and suffering, but at the same time there is a strong and passionate search for community, for how to build again, towards the new university beyond the equally obvious fragmentation and polarisation of the old.

Openings from here?

The essays in this collection open a conversation from different standpoints, from different scales, from different interests, about the role of the academic citizen, about the conditions for such a role, about its possible futures, and inevitably also about the purpose of the academic citizen in envisioning how to move forward. The essays project different ontological and epistemic frameworks with varying, and at times, conflicting conceptions of the purpose of universities, their moral compasses, and the overall virtues guiding any conception, and contestation, of academic citizenship. Through this diverse array of contributions, one thing becomes abundantly clear – the concept of academic citizenship remains an evolving,

dynamic metaphor, constantly inviting discourse, contestation, and rigorous examination of the values that underpin our daily academic routines, our pursuit of knowledge, and our sense of purpose as academics today.

We extend our gratitude to the authors whose insightful contributions have spurred on and embraced this ongoing conversation, and to the *Journal for Praxis in Higher Education* for offering a formally unconventional space for international scholarly debate. It is our fervent hope that this special issue will serve as a catalyst for further engagement, discussion, and action to come. May the conversations continue to flourish and travel.

Author biographies

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