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Between a rock and a hard place : academic institutional change and the problem of collective action

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Abstract

This paper argues that some of the current trends affecting academe impede on key institutional structures, or sets of interrelated norms for academic conduct, which are necessary for sustaining collective action among academics. In this sense academics and academic units may find themselves 'between a rock and a hard place', that is with new pressures for relevance, stakeholder integration and commercialisation on one side, and on the other a number of withering social conditions for actually doing good on these new requirements from the point of view of knowledge creation. The paper identifies and reviews four specific changes in this regard: secrecy and withholding behaviour, new notions of 'users', managerialism, and external PhD sponsorship. These changes are then related to three forms of problematic institutional changes: (1) a fragmentation of the academic constituency, (2) a bi-lateralization of information sharing, and (3) deprofessionalization. Finally, a number of possible meta-institutional norms are suggested for academic conduct, which may ameliorate institutional fragmentation and stimulate a coherent professionalization of academic life. (HRK /

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