

Displaced Professional Authority: Expertise and Legitimacy in Higher Education

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Abstract

Authority over teaching and learning in higher education can be shaped by organisational position and procedural responsibility as well as by educational expertise. This article conceptualises the potential misalignment between these bases of authority as *displaced professional authority*: not deprofessionalisation, but a reconfiguration of how expertise is recognised and authorised. Drawing on sociological theories of professions and higher-education governance, the article examines how performance indicators, audit practices and governance structures can mediate academic judgement by prioritising demonstrability and alignment. The argument is not that expertise is diminished, but that its authority can be conditioned by competing bases of legitimacy. The article therefore offers a conceptual lens for examining how expertise, authority and legitimacy are negotiated across political, institutional and everyday contexts, and identifies a need for empirical research into how these dynamics shape academic work and the conditions under which academic freedom is exercised.

Keywords

Professionalism, academic freedom, managerialism, accountability, governance, hybrid roles.

Introduction

In recent years, the question of who holds authority over higher education—and on what basis that authority rests—has become increasingly contested. Political actors, senior managers and external agencies exercise growing influence over the purposes and practices of universities, while the authority of academics as knowledge-based experts is subject to growing scrutiny. Higher-education research has examined these developments through the lenses of neoliberal reform, academic capitalism and new public management, highlighting how they reshape institutional governance and academic work (Deem, 1998; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Less attention, however, has been paid to how these shifts reconfigure the grounds on which authority itself is legitimised: who is recognised as entitled to make educational judgements, on what basis such entitlement is justified, and how this affects the conditions under which academic work is carried out.

This article advances the concept of *displaced professional authority* as a conceptual lens for analysing these changes. The argument does not claim a straightforward process of deprofessionalisation, nor does it assume that academic work constitutes a fully bounded profession in the classical sociological sense. Rather, it focuses on the relationship between expertise (knowledge-based capacity to make educational judgements), authority (the socially recognised right to make such judgements) and legitimacy (the basis on which that right is justified). The central claim is that these elements can become misaligned: authority over teaching, curriculum and quality may be exercised through organisational position and procedural responsibility, while the forms of expertise associated with educational and disciplinary judgement are mediated or marginalised. The notion of displacement thus captures a shift not from one professional group to another, but from epistemic to positional and procedural bases of authority.

Academic freedom is often invoked in discussions of authority in higher education, but its relationship to expertise and decision-making requires careful clarification. International frameworks such as the UNESCO (1997) Recommendation and the Magna Charta Universitatum (2020) define academic freedom as encompassing the rights of higher-education teaching personnel to teach, research and participate in institutional governance without undue interference, under conditions of intellectual and institutional autonomy. These formulations establish academic freedom as a normative condition that enables scholarly and educational work, rather than as a direct source of decision-making authority. In this sense, academic freedom secures the formal inclusion of academic staff in processes of educational governance and protects the exercise of professional judgement, but it does not in itself determine the basis on which authority is recognised within those processes. The analysis developed in this article therefore distinguishes between the formal protections associated with academic freedom and its substantive enactment in practice. While academic staff may participate in committees, boards and quality assurance processes, the extent to which their expertise is recognised as authoritative within these structures is contingent on how

legitimacy is constructed—whether through disciplinary knowledge, organisational position or procedural alignment. From this perspective, displaced professional authority does not necessarily erode academic freedom as a formal principle, but may reshape the conditions under which it can be meaningfully exercised in relation to teaching and curriculum. Academic freedom is therefore treated here as a potential normative implication of displaced professional authority, rather than as a constituent concept alongside expertise, authority and legitimacy.

Building on this conceptualisation, the article engages with, but is distinct from, existing discussions of managerialism, audit cultures, organisational professionalism and hybrid roles in higher education. Research on managerialism and audit cultures has examined structural transformations in governance and accountability (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shore & Wright, 2000), while work on changing administrative and hybrid roles has explored evolving occupational boundaries, identities and forms of organisational expertise (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). Bringing these strands together foregrounds a related question that is less often made explicit: how the grounds on which authority itself is legitimised are reconfigured. The shift examined here is therefore not primarily a redistribution of authority between groups, but a transformation in the criteria through which authority is recognised and justified.

Rather than introducing a new institutional logic or occupational category, this article offers an analytical perspective that foregrounds the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy as a dynamic and contingent configuration. The concept of displaced professional authority highlights the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative, including how positional and procedural forms of legitimacy can mediate, reshape or constrain the exercise of educational judgement. In doing so, the article contributes a conceptual lens for analysing how authority is constructed, circulated and enacted across different organisational contexts, and for examining the implications of these processes for the organisation of academic work and the conditions under which academic judgement can be exercised.

This article adopts a conceptual analytical approach to examining authority in higher education. It does not present original empirical data, nor does it aim to provide a systematic review of the literature. Rather, it develops an interpretive synthesis of existing scholarship to clarify how authority is constituted and legitimised across different contexts of higher-education governance. The analysis proceeds through a theoretically informed engagement with literature on professionalism, institutional governance and academic work, drawing selectively on empirical studies to illustrate broader patterns rather than to establish generalisable claims. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive account of higher-education systems, but to offer a conceptual lens that clarifies the shifting relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy. In this sense, the argument is heuristic: it is intended to provide a framework for

interpreting existing developments and for guiding future empirical inquiry into how these dynamics are experienced and negotiated in practice.

These dynamics can be examined across multiple sites of higher-education governance. In political and societal arenas, public discourse and policy frameworks provide competing grounds on which claims about higher education may be treated as legitimate. Scholarship on the political contestation of expertise highlights how knowledge claims acquire authority within wider relations of trust and power (Scott, 2019), while comparative studies show how performance-based funding, quality audits and policy steering reconfigure relationships between states and universities (Santiago & Carvalho, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004; Želvys et al., 2021). Such arrangements illustrate how political mandate, public accountability and economic priorities can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Within universities, these pressures are mediated through governance arrangements that redistribute decision-making authority. Over the past three decades, higher-education institutions have evolved from primarily collegial communities into complex organisations characterised by hierarchical management structures and strategic coordination. Research documents a shift from professor-led decision-making towards executive leadership and managerial oversight (Jones et al., 2025; Santiago et al., 2015; Shin, 2015). While the extent and form of these changes vary across national systems, they commonly involve a greater emphasis on metrics, planning and accountability, which can privilege organisational position over disciplinary or pedagogical expertise in decisions about teaching and learning (Shepherd, 2018; Taberner, 2018). As Rowlands (2013) shows, collegial bodies such as academic boards may continue to play important roles, but their influence is often reshaped within broader managerial frameworks.

At the level of everyday practice, these arrangements are experienced through quality assurance processes, performance indicators and reporting requirements that structure how educational work is documented and justified (Elken et al., 2020; Morley, 2003; Taberner, 2018). Programme coordinators, course leaders and administrative or hybrid staff operate within institutional environments in which educational judgement must often be articulated through formal procedures and external standards. While such systems can support coordination and accountability, they can also privilege demonstrability and compliance over more tacit or context-sensitive forms of expertise (Elken et al., 2020; Taberner, 2018). At the same time, changes in administrative and hybrid roles have contributed to a blurring of distinctions between organisational competence and educational or disciplinary expertise (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). As heterogeneous forms of work are brought under a shared professional vocabulary, positional authority may take on the appearance of epistemic legitimacy—a dynamic central to the analysis developed here.

Taken together, these developments point not to a uniform transformation of higher education, but to a set of recurring tendencies through which authority is reconfigured across different contexts. The article therefore examines displaced professional authority across three analytical sites: the political and societal arenas in which higher education is framed; institutional governance structures through which authority is organised; and the everyday practices through which it is enacted and negotiated. These are not discrete levels at which a single form of authority is independently reconfigured. They are analytical sites in which different claims to educational authority intersect. Throughout the article, educational authority refers to the socially recognised right to shape decisions concerning teaching, curriculum and educational quality. The analysis therefore asks how claims grounded in political mandate, positional or procedural responsibility and epistemic expertise affect the conditions under which educational expertise carries such authority.

Developing this perspective, the article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy in higher education, offering a more precise vocabulary for analysing their divergence. Second, it situates debates on managerialism, professionalism and hybrid roles within a common analytical frame focused on the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative. Third, it provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research into how these dynamics are experienced, negotiated and contested in different institutional and national settings, and with what implications for the organisation of academic work.

Expertise, authority and legitimacy

Understanding how authority in higher education becomes detached from expertise requires clarifying the relationship between three closely related but analytically distinct concepts: expertise, authority and legitimacy. *Expertise* refers to the knowledge-based capacity to make informed judgements within a domain. *Authority* denotes the socially recognised right to make such judgements and to have them accepted. *Legitimacy* concerns the grounds on which that right is justified, whether through knowledge, position, procedure or other forms of validation. While these elements are often aligned in idealised accounts of professional practice, they may also diverge. The analysis that follows focuses on how such divergence is produced and sustained in higher education.

Classical sociology of professions provides a useful starting point. Professions have been understood as occupational groups granted epistemic and moral authority on the basis of specialised knowledge and public trust. Greenwood's (1957) early formulation and Freidson's (2001) influential account of professionalism both emphasise the alignment of expertise, authority and responsibility within relatively stable jurisdictions. Within this model, authority is justified through peer review, disciplinary competence and a normative commitment to serving the public good.

Subsequent work has complicated this picture by emphasising that professional authority is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated and contingent relation. Legitimacy depends not only on technical competence but on the social and organisational conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative (Saks & Adams, 2019). Professionals frequently operate within environments shaped by multiple, and sometimes competing, expectations, including efficiency, accountability and ethical responsibility (Harrits, 2016). Professionalism, in this sense, is better understood as an ongoing practice of securing and maintaining legitimacy than as a stable occupational status.

Higher education occupies an ambiguous position within this landscape. Academic work has historically been organised around disciplinary expertise and collegial self-regulation, yet it has not been constituted as a fully bounded profession in the classical sense. There is no unified system of credentialing, no exclusive jurisdiction over teaching and no consistent requirement for formal pedagogical training (Shin, 2015). Authority in universities has therefore rested on a hybrid configuration combining knowledge-based judgement with organisational roles and procedures. Weber's (1921/2019) typology helps illuminate this arrangement: elements of traditional authority are visible in collegial recognition of scholarly standing, while rational-legal authority is embedded in formal roles, rules and institutional hierarchies.

Contemporary transformations in higher education can be understood as a reconfiguration of this hybrid arrangement. As Henkel (2005) shows, changing regimes of accountability and governance reshape the conditions under which academic expertise is recognised and exercised. At the same time, organisational practices increasingly frame administrative and managerial roles in professionalised terms, conferring forms of legitimacy grounded in organisational competence rather than disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge. Gornitzka and Marheim Larsen's (2004) analysis of Norwegian universities illustrates how administrative roles have been differentiated and reclassified, raising questions about the emergence of new forms of organisational professionalism.

This expansion of the professional label has important implications for how authority is constructed. As organisational roles are described as 'professional', the distinction between knowledge-based expertise and organisational function becomes less clear. Authority may then be justified not through epistemic credibility but through positional responsibility and procedural competence. The displacement at issue in this article should therefore not be understood as the erosion of a clearly bounded academic profession, but as a shift in the grounds of legitimacy: from expertise-based justification towards positional and procedural forms of validation.

These developments can be situated within broader analyses of changing governance regimes. Freidson's (2001) distinction between professional, bureaucratic and market principles provides a useful heuristic for understanding competing bases of authority. The professional principle privileges expert judgement and peer accountability; the bureaucratic principle

emphasises rules, standardisation and audit; and the market principle foregrounds competition and responsiveness to external demand. Rather than treating these as discrete or fully coherent ‘logics’, the analysis here uses them as ideal-typical reference points for understanding how different forms of legitimacy are invoked in practice. In higher education, shifts in governance have increasingly elevated bureaucratic and market-based forms of justification, often requiring that expertise be translated into measurable outputs or documented procedures.

Empirical research in higher education documents how these shifts are enacted. Studies of governance show the growing importance of managerial coordination and strategic oversight (Maassen, 2003; Rowlands, 2013), while research on hybrid or third-space roles highlights the emergence of actors who operate across academic and administrative domains (Vesles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008). At the level of everyday practice, Trowler (2008) demonstrates how institutional norms and expectations shape the enactment of academic work. Taken together, this literature indicates that authority in universities is not simply redistributed, but reconstituted through changing relationships between expertise, organisational position and procedural accountability.

Viewed through the lens of displaced professional authority, these developments highlight a recurring possibility: expertise, authority and legitimacy can become misaligned. Authority over teaching and learning may be exercised through organisational roles that require procedural compliance, while the forms of expertise necessary to make substantive educational judgements are mediated, constrained or subordinated. This conceptualisation does not assume a uniform transformation across all systems, but identifies a set of tendencies through which authority is reconfigured. It is this misalignment—rather than the decline of a profession per se—that provides the analytical foundation for the sections that follow.

Political and societal authority

To understand how the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy is reconfigured in higher education, it is useful to begin with the political and societal contexts in which universities are situated. For the purposes of this analysis, this encompasses the public discourses, policy frameworks and forms of political representation through which expectations about the purposes, responsibilities and governance of higher education are articulated. These contexts matter because they establish competing grounds on which claims about higher education may be treated as legitimate. Educational expertise is one such basis, but political mandate, public accountability and economic priorities can provide others. The analytical question is therefore not simply who speaks about higher education, but on what basis particular claims acquire authority and how those claims subsequently shape the conditions within which educational judgement is exercised.

Public contestation of expertise provides one illustration of this relationship (Scott, 2019). Expertise may be challenged not because the underlying knowledge has disappeared, but

because its authority depends upon wider judgements about trust, representation and legitimacy. Such contestation takes different forms and varies considerably between political and national contexts: in some cases it concerns the credibility of expert advice in public decision-making, while in others universities or particular forms of academic knowledge themselves become objects of political scrutiny. The significance for displaced professional authority lies not in treating these developments as evidence of a uniform decline in expertise, but in recognising that epistemic credibility does not by itself secure authority. Political mandate, public visibility and other forms of legitimacy may coexist with, compete with or override claims grounded in specialised knowledge.

These developments are also reflected in the ways higher-education systems are governed. Across many national contexts, political actors play a central role in setting system-level priorities and performance expectations through strategies, regulatory instruments and hybrid steering arrangements (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019). The Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al., 2026) documents substantial cross-national variation in the de facto protection of academic freedom and includes institutional autonomy as one of its institutional dimensions. Its most recent data identify significant declines in institutional autonomy across a range of national settings, while also showing considerable variation in their extent and trajectory. More broadly, performance-based funding, policy steering and other regulatory arrangements demonstrate how formal institutional autonomy can coexist with mechanisms through which political priorities influence university activity. Taken together, these patterns show how different bases of political and institutional legitimacy can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

A related feature of contemporary higher-education governance is the growing use of technocratic mechanisms such as audit systems, economic models and performance indicators. Such mechanisms translate complex institutional and educational processes into forms that can be compared, monitored and incorporated into system-level decision-making. In doing so, they can privilege forms of legitimacy grounded in measurement and demonstrability over those grounded in disciplinary or pedagogical judgement. The issue is not that measurement is inherently opposed to expertise, but that it provides an alternative basis on which claims about educational quality and institutional performance can acquire authority. Comparative research shows how these forms of steering reshape relationships between states, institutions and academic staff by strengthening organisational coordination and accountability (Lorenz, 2012; Musselin, 2013; Santiago & Carvalho, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004).

What is at stake in these developments is not simply the increased presence of external influence, but a shift in the criteria through which authority may be justified. Within this analytical frame, political and policy actors need not claim expertise in educational practice for their interventions to carry authority; their claims may instead derive legitimacy from electoral mandate, economic rationale or public accountability. Decisions about higher education can therefore be framed and evaluated according to criteria that are only partially aligned with

pedagogical or disciplinary forms of knowledge. This does not render educational expertise irrelevant, but changes the conditions under which it carries authority: expert judgement must operate within frameworks whose terms may be established through other bases of legitimacy. From this perspective, the significance of the political and societal context lies not in the exclusion of academic actors, but in the coexistence and potential prioritisation of different grounds of legitimacy in shaping the conditions under which educational judgement is exercised.

Taken together, these developments illustrate not a uniform erosion of academic expertise, but ways in which its authority can be reconfigured. Political and economic rationalities can shape the criteria through which educational value is recognised, and academic judgement may be required to align with externally defined priorities and indicators. From this perspective, expertise is not displaced in the sense of disappearing, but repositioned: it remains present, but its authority can be mediated through political, organisational and procedural forms of legitimacy. It is this reconfiguration—rather than a simple loss of expertise—that constitutes a key dimension of displaced professional authority, in which political and economic forms of legitimacy can shape the conditions under which educational expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Institutional governance and managerial authority

Within universities, the broader reconfiguration of expertise, authority and legitimacy is mediated through institutional governance. Over recent decades, many higher-education systems have introduced reforms commonly associated with managerialism, new public management (NPM) or enterprise governance. These developments have altered how authority is organised and exercised, not by eliminating academic expertise, but by reshaping the conditions under which it is recognised as authoritative. In particular, organisational position and procedural responsibility have become more prominent bases for legitimising decision-making in areas historically shaped strongly by disciplinary and pedagogical judgement (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shepherd, 2018).

These reforms were frequently framed as processes of modernisation. Across OECD contexts, changes in the 1990s and 2000s promoted efficiency, accountability and responsiveness, encouraging universities to adopt management practices drawn from the corporate sector (Amaral et al., 2003; Deem, 1998). In many cases, this involved a strengthening of hierarchical coordination and strategic planning alongside existing collegial structures. O'Reilly and Reed (2011) describe this as an increased reliance on bureaucratic forms of control, in which metrics and line management play a greater role in coordinating organisational activity. While the extent of these changes varies across national and institutional contexts, they are commonly associated with more formalised accountability arrangements that shape how educational decisions are justified.

Market-oriented mechanisms have developed alongside these bureaucratic forms. Student-satisfaction measures, rankings and performance-based funding provide institutional mechanisms through which competition, comparison and reputation can enter university governance (Croucher & Lacy, 2022; Watts, 2017). Senior leaders—such as vice-chancellors, rectors and deans—may accordingly be positioned as organisational executives accountable to governing boards and external stakeholders (Croucher & Lacy, 2022). Within such arrangements, authority can be linked to the capacity to manage resources, mitigate risk and demonstrate performance, rather than resting solely on disciplinary or pedagogical expertise. This does not displace expertise entirely, but reframes the conditions under which it contributes to decision-making.

These shifts are also visible in the criteria through which educational leadership is legitimised. Research suggests that leadership roles may emphasise managerial competence alongside, and sometimes over, scholarly or pedagogical experience (Ekman et al., 2018; Santiago & Carvalho, 2012). Where organisational responsibility provides the principal basis of a leadership role, authority may therefore derive from position and the capacity to navigate institutional processes rather than directly from expertise in curriculum or pedagogy. In such cases, expertise may instead be consulted, translated or operationalised within frameworks established through positional responsibility and procedural accountability.

Understanding how managerial authority becomes established within universities requires attention to this distinction between bases of legitimacy. Managerial authority need not be justified through claims to disciplinary or pedagogical expertise; it may instead derive from responsibility for organisational coherence, risk management and accountability to institutional or external requirements. These are themselves legitimate organisational functions and may require substantial expertise, but they differ from the epistemic grounds traditionally associated with academic judgement. The analytical issue is therefore not whether managerial actors possess knowledge, but what kind of knowledge provides the basis for authority in decisions concerning educational practice. Decision-making authority can consequently reside with actors whose relevant expertise is principally organisational or procedural, while disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge enters the process through consultation or implementation.

A related development concerns the expanding use of the term *professional* to describe administrative and managerial roles. Studies in the Australian context show how administrative staff have identified increasingly with professional status and occupied more visible strategic positions within universities (Szekeres, 2004, 2011). This form of professionalisation confers legitimacy grounded in organisational competence and procedural expertise rather than disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge. Comparable processes of occupational professionalisation have also been examined in other organisational domains, including hospital administration (Cronin et al., 2018). Within higher education, the significance of this vocabulary lies in its potential to obscure distinctions between forms of expertise, allowing

organisational competence to function as a proxy for educational judgement and thereby reinforcing positional authority in domains shaped by disciplinary knowledge.

Administrative actors also play important roles in quality assurance, compliance, data management and student services, activities that help establish the organisational parameters within which academic work is conducted (Gornitzka & Marheim Larsen, 2004; Szekeres, 2011). Their involvement need not itself constitute displacement; specialised administrative knowledge may be essential to effective institutional governance. The relevant question is how such expertise relates to authority when organisational processes extend to decisions concerning teaching, curriculum or educational quality. Where procedural competence becomes a basis for determining substantive educational matters, distinctions between organisational expertise and educational judgement may blur.

Hybrid or third-space roles further complicate this picture. Staff working across academic and administrative domains often combine elements of disciplinary knowledge with organisational and procedural expertise (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008). Such roles can facilitate coordination and translation across different parts of the institution while also illustrating how authority can emerge through the ability to navigate institutional systems and reconcile competing demands. The authority associated with hybrid roles is therefore not located exclusively in either expertise or position, but may arise through their interaction.

Managerial authority is also enacted through organisational practices that signal legitimacy. Strategic plans, performance reports and evaluation frameworks provide mechanisms through which institutions demonstrate alignment with external expectations. As Shore and Wright (2000) argue, such practices can be understood as forms of performative accountability, in which organisational coherence and control are enacted through documentation and representation. Metrics—including research assessments, student surveys and performance indicators—translate complex activities into comparable outputs (Lorenz, 2012; Tapper & Salter, 2004). In doing so, they can affect which dimensions of institutional activity become most visible and readily available as grounds for organisational judgement.

Taken together, these developments can be understood as a reconfiguration of collegial governance rather than its disappearance. Academic judgement may continue to carry substantial authority, but it can operate within frameworks structured by institutional strategies, metrics and procedural standards. Committees and collegial bodies may retain formal decision-making roles while operating within organisational environments that shape the terms on which decisions are made (Rowlands, 2013). Authority is therefore not necessarily removed from academic actors, but can be mediated through systems that affect how academic judgement is articulated and justified.

From the perspective of displaced professional authority, the key issue is not simply the growth of managerial control, but the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy within these arrangements. Organisational position and procedural accountability can provide bases for legitimising decisions alongside disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, and may condition the terms under which that expertise enters decision-making. This should not be read as implying a uniform transformation across institutions or systems, but as identifying a set of tendencies through which educational authority may be reshaped. Institutional governance is therefore a key analytical site for examining when and how educational expertise is recognised as authoritative, and how organisational structures mediate its exercise.

Local governance, compliance and everyday practice

If broader political and institutional arrangements shape the conditions under which authority is organised, everyday practice is where relationships between expertise, authority and legitimacy are enacted and experienced. Here, authority is exercised and negotiated through routine interactions among academics, administrators and hybrid staff, within institutional procedures and accountability requirements that structure educational work. It is also where competing claims to professionalism become particularly visible—not as a simple distinction between professional and non-professional actors, but as a tension between different bases of legitimacy, including disciplinary expertise, organisational responsibility and procedural accountability.

These dynamics are particularly evident in the bureaucratic infrastructures that structure teaching and learning. At faculty and departmental level, staff operate within established systems of quality assurance, learning-outcome specification and accreditation. While such systems can support coordination and accountability, research also shows how formalised quality processes can constrain discretionary judgement and generate substantial demands for documentation (Elken et al., 2020; Morley, 2003; Taberner, 2018). Where activities such as specifying learning outcomes, documenting curriculum alignment or justifying assessment design are undertaken primarily to demonstrate conformity with institutional requirements, they can be understood as a form of *compulsory performativity*. In such circumstances, quality assurance may be experienced less as reflective evaluation than as an obligation to demonstrate alignment with established standards.

Programme coordination provides an analytical illustration of how expertise and authority can become partially decoupled. A coordinator may possess substantial expertise in curriculum, pedagogy and student learning while remaining accountable through organisational processes that prescribe how educational decisions must be documented, approved or evaluated. Where the ability to demonstrate conformity with such requirements becomes important to securing approval or recognition, what might be termed *accountability competence* can operate as a basis of legitimacy alongside pedagogical or disciplinary judgement.

Displacement in this sense does not imply an absence of expertise, but concerns the conditions under which that expertise is able to carry authority.

These processes also involve ongoing judgements about what constitutes legitimate authority in particular situations. Actors must not only exercise expertise, but interpret which forms of justification are likely to be recognised within the institutional context. This can involve framing educational reasoning through established procedures, performance indicators or accountability requirements, including where these sit uneasily alongside disciplinary or pedagogical considerations. Legitimacy is therefore not simply imposed through formal governance structures; it is also enacted through everyday decisions about how educational work is framed, justified and presented. Academic, administrative and hybrid staff can consequently participate in reproducing organisational forms of authority through the practical necessity of operating within their terms.

These processes can also have an affective dimension. Requirements to report student evaluations, respond to performance data or document educational practice may encourage forms of self-monitoring through which academics interpret their work in relation to institutional expectations. Archer's (2000) account of internal conversations provides a way of understanding how individuals seek to reconcile such expectations with personal and professional commitments. Similarly, Tandilashvili and Tandilashvili (2022) identify tensions between managerial norms and educational values within performance-oriented environments. Acting 'professionally' in these circumstances may therefore involve navigating competing expectations and bases of legitimacy rather than simply applying an established body of expertise.

Hybrid or third-space roles further illustrate how authority is negotiated in practice. Staff working across academic and administrative domains often mediate between different expectations and forms of knowledge (Kehm, 2015; Smith et al., 2021; Whitchurch, 2009). Their credibility may depend partly on their ability to translate between organisational requirements and academic practices. Within such roles, procedural literacy—the ability to interpret regulations, manage documentation and navigate institutional processes—can itself constitute a valued form of expertise. This need not replace disciplinary or pedagogical knowledge, but can become an additional basis on which authority is recognised within organisational settings.

Taken together, these arrangements can shape how educational judgement is articulated. Rather than relying solely on collegial deliberation, formal quality systems may require educational decisions to be rendered demonstrable through specified standards, documentation and evidence of improvement. Research on European quality systems identifies a growing emphasis on evidencing improvement within wider evaluative-state dynamics (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). Audit processes can similarly operate as forms of ritualised verification (Power, 1997), generating documentation demands that compete with opportunities for

more informal or reflective forms of educational work (Elken et al., 2020). The significance for displaced professional authority lies in how such processes make particular forms of judgement more readily visible, verifiable and institutionally actionable than others.

These arrangements can also produce different interpretations of what constitutes professional conduct. For some actors, professionalism may be associated with responsiveness to organisational priorities and procedural expectations; for others, it may remain more closely tied to disciplinary standards and educational values. Studies of performance management and appraisal show how staff navigate such expectations by recalibrating how their work is presented and justified (Field, 2015; Houston et al., 2006). Programme coordination again illustrates the potential tension: influence may depend heavily on relational credibility and collegial trust, while formal institutional processes also require educational decisions to be expressed in procedurally recognisable forms.

From the perspective of displaced professional authority, the significance of these everyday practices lies in their capacity to reproduce particular configurations of legitimacy. Documentation generated through local quality and accountability processes can feed into institutional reporting and external evaluation, thereby reinforcing the organisational value of measurable indicators and procedural alignment. Everyday practices therefore do not merely respond to governance structures but can contribute to their reproduction. At the same time, these arrangements depend on the participation of academics, administrators and hybrid staff whose different forms of expertise remain necessary to educational work. The resulting configuration is one in which professionalism can involve an ongoing process of navigation between epistemic judgement and organisational requirements, rather than functioning as a stable or uncontested basis of authority.

Competing bases of legitimacy and the reconfiguration of professional authority

Across the political, institutional and everyday contexts examined in this article, the analysis identifies a recurring possibility: expertise, authority and legitimacy can become misaligned. Educational expertise continues to inform teaching, curriculum and educational quality, yet the authority to make and justify decisions in these domains may also be exercised through organisational position and procedural accountability. This condition is described here as displaced professional authority—not the disappearance of expertise, but a reconfiguration of the terms under which it is recognised as authoritative.

Understanding this shift requires reconsidering how professionalism operates in higher education. Following Freidson (2001), professionalism can be understood as a mode of organising work in which authority is grounded in specialised knowledge, peer accountability and a normative commitment to the public good. In universities, however, such authority has historically rested less on formal professional closure than on the credibility of disciplinary

expertise and scholarly judgement. The analysis developed here suggests that these epistemic foundations now operate alongside, and in tension with, alternative bases of legitimacy, particularly those associated with organisational governance and political accountability.

From this perspective, the key issue is not the coexistence of multiple forms of legitimacy, but how they are prioritised and translated into decision-making authority. Political mandates, organisational procedures and performance indicators provide alternative means of justifying decisions about higher education. These forms of legitimacy do not necessarily replace expertise, but can mediate how it is mobilised: academic judgement may be required to align with institutional strategies, become visible through documentation, or be validated through measurable outcomes. Authority is therefore not necessarily removed from academic actors, but can be re-situated within frameworks that condition how expertise is exercised and recognised.

This interpretation is consistent with broader analyses of contemporary governance. Studies of audit cultures (Lorenz, 2012) and performance-oriented accountability (Watts, 2017) show how organisational and policy environments reshape expectations of academic work, while research on the political contestation of expertise highlights the ambivalent status of knowledge in public life (Scott, 2019). Expertise may be invoked as a resource for solving problems, yet constrained when it challenges political or organisational priorities. One potential normative implication concerns academic freedom. As Gray (2022) and Ryder (2022) suggest, the credibility accorded to academic judgement matters to the conditions under which academic freedom can be exercised; changes in how expertise is recognised as authoritative may therefore have consequences for its substantive enactment.

Within institutions, these dynamics are reflected in the reconfiguration of professional roles. Managerial forms of professionalism emphasise responsiveness, accountability and demonstrability, reframing academic work in terms that align with organisational priorities. As O'Reilly and Reed (2011) argue, such developments reorient professional practice towards meeting institutional expectations, while Haga's (1976) account of managerial professionalism illustrates how responsibility may be recoded in terms of efficiency and compliance. The result is not the elimination of academic values, but their reinterpretation within administrative and procedural frameworks.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a broader reordering of how authority can be constituted in higher education. Across the tendencies examined here, authority may be justified through positional responsibility, procedural alignment and demonstrable performance alongside, or sometimes in preference to, expertise. The concept of displaced professional authority captures this shift by foregrounding the misalignment between knowledge-based judgement and the conditions under which it is recognised as legitimate. This does not imply a uniform transformation across all contexts, but identifies a set of tendencies through which authority is reconfigured.

The contribution of this perspective is therefore not to propose a simple restoration of professional authority, but to clarify the terms on which it is negotiated. By focusing on the relationship between expertise, authority and legitimacy, it becomes possible to analyse how competing expectations are lived and mediated in practice, and how they shape the conditions under which academic judgement can be exercised. This, in turn, points to the need for further empirical work on how these dynamics unfold across different institutional and national settings, and with what implications for the future of higher education.

Conclusion

This article has examined the reconfiguration of authority in higher education across political, institutional and everyday domains. While shifts associated with managerial governance and changing accountability regimes are well established, the analysis suggests that their significance can extend beyond organisational adjustment to the grounds on which authority is claimed, exercised and recognised. The concept of displaced professional authority captures a potential misalignment between educational expertise and the bases on which authority is legitimised. Although its specific configurations will vary across national and institutional contexts, the analysis identifies recurring tensions between epistemic judgement and positional or procedural forms of legitimacy.

Across these analytical sites, legitimacy is constructed, circulated and enacted through different but interacting mechanisms. Political and societal arenas furnish policy, economic and public rationales through which claims about higher education are justified; institutional governance translates such rationales through organisational hierarchies, audit and accountability arrangements; and everyday practice interprets and reproduces them through decisions about educational work. The sites therefore do not represent separate forms or owners of authority, but illuminate how different claims to educational authority intersect and shape the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative.

Understanding this reconfiguration clarifies what is at stake in contemporary debates about higher education. The issue is not simply whether academic authority is declining, but how the relationship between expertise, legitimacy and decision-making is being reorganised. Organisational vocabularies of professionalism, for example, can obscure distinctions between different forms of expertise, enabling positional authority to function as a proxy for knowledge-based judgement. From this perspective, the challenge is less one of restoring a prior model of professional authority than of analysing how authority is constituted under contemporary conditions.

One normative implication of this analysis concerns academic freedom. Academic freedom is not reducible to the possession of expertise, nor is it guaranteed by formal participation in governance structures. Rather, its substantive meaning depends on the conditions under which expertise is recognised as authoritative within institutional decision-making. While aca-

demetic staff may retain formal rights to participate in educational governance, the reconfiguration of authority described in this article suggests that the exercise of academic freedom may be mediated by organisational and procedural forms of legitimacy. This does not imply its erosion as a principle, but highlights the need to consider how it is enacted in practice in relation to teaching and curriculum.

The analysis developed here therefore points toward the need for further empirical and conceptual work. In particular, there is a need to examine how different actors interpret and negotiate competing bases of legitimacy in specific institutional contexts, and how these negotiations shape not only the organisation of academic work, but also the conditions under which educational judgement is recognised, contested and sustained. Such work would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how authority operates in higher education and its implications for the future of academic practice.

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