Academic 'boundary work' in a regionally engaged university

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Abstract

Widening discussion of the role of universities in regional development has shifted the strategic attention of European higher education institutions towards their regional impact and the production of knowledge in cooperation with regional partners, thereby 'stretching' core university missions and the boundaries of academic work. This stretch created tensions between the norms and practices of the academy and the surrounding community. The study explores how academics in a Swedish regionally engaged university process these tensions through 'boundary work' against the background of their professional trajectories and roles. Drawing on 26 narrative interviews, it identifies four scenarios: researchers with standard academic training combine scientific rigour with local relevance without significantly altering their core identities; researchers with a more diversified professional background pursue 'excellence with impact' prioritising collaborative knowledge production over career progression; academics with standard training invested in non-research tasks divide their time between the university and the region without subordinating relevance to excellence; and academics with mixed backgrounds and role portfolios fuse the boundaries, giving preference to the 'real world' over the campus and exhibiting a greater variety of identity choices.

Keywords: regional engagement; mission stretch; boundary work; academic work; academic identity; role identity.

JEL: I23; O20; O30; R10; R58.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, European universities have been challenged by the international competition for excellence in research and teaching and by the EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education that has recurrently called for their increased contribution to regional development and innovation (European Commission, 2006, 2011, 2017). Further pressures towards strengthening the regional role of the universities have been coming from national policymakers in countries like the Netherlands or Sweden that have been trying to promote local valorisation of academic knowledge and universities' cooperation with their immediate environment through various funding instruments (National Agency for Higher Education, 2006; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). Cumulatively, these pressures have prompted institutional transformations in many universities in Europe that have 'stretched' (Scott, 2007) their strategies towards targeting multiple missions at once – internationalisation, scientific excellence, high-quality teaching, local relevance, etc., and have undertaken sincere attempts to make the regional mission an integral part of university governance, on a par with research and education.

Several prominent conceptualisations of this institutional transformation have fashioned an enthusiastic image of the changing academy, emphasising, for instance, 'context-driven' and 'socially robust' knowledge production or 'triple-helix' collaborations between the university and its public and private stakeholders (Hessels & van Lente, 2008), all leading to an inevitable substitution of the 'ivory-tower' scientists with 'academic entrepreneurs'. At the same time, a number of studies have shown that the situation of the 'mission stretch' creates tensions for organisational leaders and faculty members alike, making it difficult for managers to invest sufficient resources into engaging with surrounding communities (Benneworth, Young, & Normann, 2017), and marginalising activities not pertaining to the core tasks of teaching and research, especially for junior academics (Krücken, Meier, & Müller, 2009).

This study approaches the problem from a neo-institutional perspective on governance as involving the construction, maintenance, and development of individual actors' identities, as well as a neutralisation of factors producing identities that contravene institutional values and goals (March & Olsen, 1995). Therefore, the first logical step in the transition towards an enhanced university

governance of regional engagement is understanding the existing identities of academics who drive regional engagement, along with the processes and mechanisms that shape and support their identities. Accordingly, this research conceptualises organisational 'mission stretch' as 'identity stretch' on the micro level and explores, *how individual academics process identity tensions triggered by the experience of navigating the increasingly fuzzy boundaries between the university campus and the region*. The conceptual framework draws on the insights from the sociology of science and, in particular, the notions of 'context-impregnated' construction of scientific method (Knorr-Cetina, 1981) and 'boundary work' of scientists as agents defending their professional autonomy while simultaneously interpreting themselves to the external public and pursuing resources for their core activities (Gieryn, 1983; Lam, 2015). Empirical data derive from a single, interview-based case study of a regionally engaged university (Linköping University in the Östergötland region, southeastern Sweden) which highlights four scenarios of academics' responses to identity stretch in conjunction with their professional trajectories and roles.

2. Conceptual Framework

The concept of 'academic identity' has been called upon in higher education research to mediate between the actor and the structure, the individual and the frameworks – discipline, profession, institutional governance, national policy, globalisation, etc., – that condition his/her cognition and actions (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013). Academic identity can be understood as a *"relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role"* (Ibarra, 1999, pp. 764-765, with reference to Schine, 1978). Stable academic identities can be challenged by alterations in institutional contexts, for instance, by structural policy changes in higher education (Clarke *et al.*, 2013; Evans & Nixon, 2015; Henkel, 2000). In other words, identities *"are renegotiated and reasserted as academics encounter new expectations and pressures in their work environments"* (Leišytė, 2015, p. 65). Weighted against alternative identities and roles, past and present backgrounds, and future goals and capabilities, these expectations and pressures may be modified to protect traditional roles, or induce role modifications (Jain, George, & Maltarich, 2009). Cognitive negotiation and optimisation of identity

claims can bear implications for academics' behaviour in terms of role claiming and enactment (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010).

Contemporary research has highlighted the importance of 'boundary work' in identity construction (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Riesch, 2010) and in capturing the diversity and complexity of academics' identity responses to external challenges (Lam, 2015). Academics encounter an 'identity stretch' when their professional norms and role identities are confronted by tensions arising from mission-specific logics and boundaries (Whitchurch, 2009); for example, when university administration recommends academics to convert engagement into publications, disregarding dissimilar temporal logics and devaluing their engagement identity (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012). Academics can ease the stretch through 'boundary work' as an *"attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organisation) for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as 'non-science'"* (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). The concept has proven particularly useful in exploring the tensions between the academy and the private sector (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Lam, 2010) and between professional roles in organisation (Ashforth, 2001; Whitchurch, 2008).

It could be argued that regionally engaged academics *de facto* operate in what Whitchurch (2008) calls the 'third space' – designated areas of activity, such as regional development and community outreach, that require mixed expertise and skills. Facing the pressure of conflicted requirements, they might choose to maintain the continuity of established roles, interact with external domains and exploit the differences in their roles, disregard the boundaries and move outside the higher education sector, or create blended roles. Similar scenarios of adaptive strategies were studied by Lam (2010, 2015) and Leišytė (2015). In their analyses, navigation of the boundaries between science and business, on the one hand, and between disciplinary and organisational roles, on the other hand, likewise revealed four identity orientations. Academics of the first type maintain 'traditional' normative boundaries and their roles of autonomous and disinterested researchers, whilst academics on the opposite pole of the spectrum are completely 'unbounded' because they abandon their identities, reject other opportunities within organisations, and search for alternatives. In-between, there are hybrid identity types, as well as academics who replace professional values with rival

values, moving to managerial or entrepreneurial positions on campus. Academics with hybrid identities may recognise the importance of external collaborations but subordinate them to research goals; they may negotiate and expand the boundaries, accommodating contending goals and practices as a legitimate and desirable part of research, while preserving core scientific values; or they may fuse boundaries and assume dual role identities.

Knorr-Cetina (1981) argued that academic work is decision-impregnated and locally situated in the sense that the choice of approaches and methods proceeds from previous choices and from workplace practices. Historically, academic profession has been closely associated with departmental and disciplinary communities, networks, etc. (collective identity), and with the functions of teaching and research (role identity). These continue to exert a strong influence as newcomers and outsiders are socialised to academic positions through occupational training (PhD, postdoctoral projects, etc.). Therefore, this paper contends that the boundary work of academics exposed to regional engagement is to some extent influenced by their professional (socio-cognitive) and role (operational) impregnation. To exemplify, scholars involved in collaboration with non-academic partners in their formative years seem more likely to pursue hybrid careers or careers outside universities (Hakala, 2008; Lam & Campos, 2015; Lee & Miozzo, 2015). Similarly, rewarding experiences of external engagement in the academic workplace increase the scientists' propensity to team up with the same stakeholders or start a business (Fritsch & Krabel, 2012; Lotrecchiano *et al.*, 2016; Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth, & Castro-Martínez, 2015), whereas the mode of those engagements appears to be correlated with the function performed (e.g., guest lectures in teaching vs. spin-off creation in research).

Based on this reasoning, it is possible to suggest a heuristic for mapping the boundary work and identity orientations of regionally engaged academics that would allow to locate academic professionals based on their developmental trajectories and occupational roles (*Figure 1*). Academics concentrating on research tasks and following a more straightforward path from doctoral studies to full professorship (*Scenario 1*) are expected to protect the boundaries and retain the dominant identity of researchers by subordinating regional collaborations to their academic agenda and standards. Their peers in research-intensive work but with a less conventional professional background are likely to combine elements of

multiple roles while remaining focused on research activities; they would negotiate and expand the boundaries, accommodating the needs and goals of regional stakeholders in their academic work, only on their own terms (*Scenario II*). Academics invested in other roles in the university (teaching, management, leadership; *Scenario III*) will most probably maintain academic identity in their contacts with external domains, but treat the differences between the two worlds in a more inclusive way due to a greater compatibility between the logics of their academic and external activities. Lastly, academics with mixed backgrounds and mixed role portfolios (*Scenario IV*) will be able to fuse boundaries and assume dual role identities, blend their roles on campus akin to Whitchurch's 'third space professionals', or consider moving outside the campus.
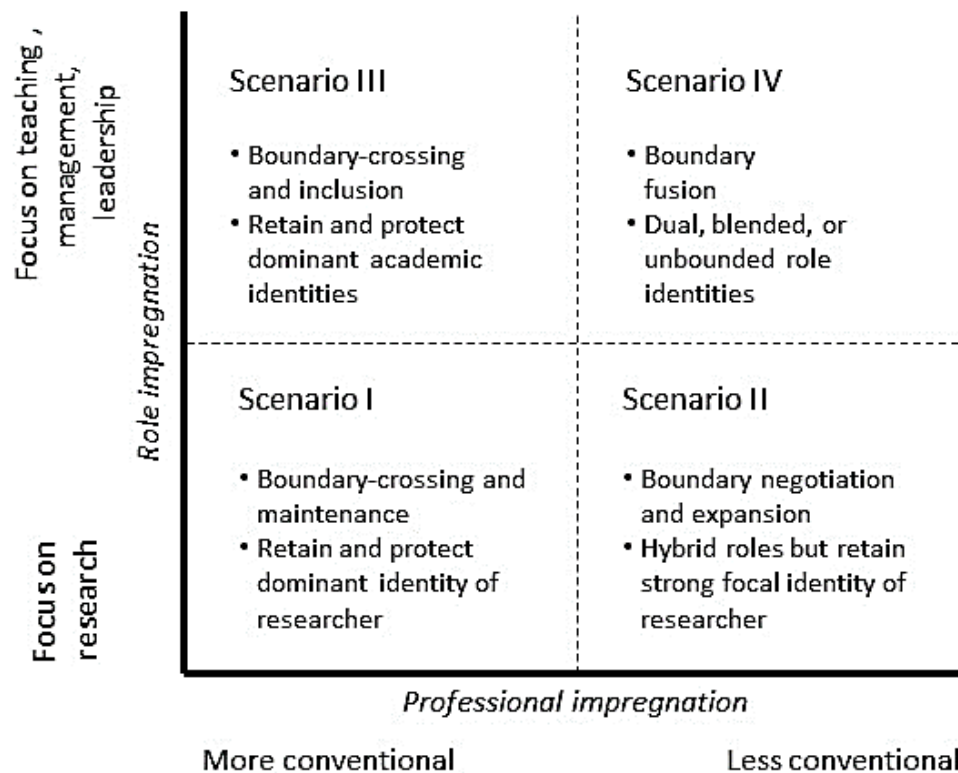

Figure 1. **A heuristic of academic 'boundary work' and identity orientations in a regionally engaged university**

3. Case Overview and Methodology

This qualitative exploratory case study relies on documentary, interview and observational data collected in Linköping University (LiU; Östergötland County, Southeast Sweden) in February-May 2018. From its beginnings in the 1960s-1970s to this day, the university has been central to the socio-economic renewal of a mainly agricultural region with prominent industrial and military centres in the cities of Linköping and Norrköping (Etzkowitz & Klofsten, 2005). With some 27000 students and 4000 employees in four campuses, the university came as number 28 in Quacquarelli Symonds 2017 'Top 50 Universities Under 50' and ranked 60 in the Times Higher Education '150 under 50'.

LiU frames itself as an innovative university – it was a forerunner in organising research in interdisciplinary themes (1979) and adopting problem-based learning in education (mid-1980s); it created LiU Holding (1995) and a formal position of Vice-Rector for Collaboration (1998) thereby institutionalising the support for entrepreneurship and cooperation with regional businesses; and it proclaimed boundary spanning one of its core values (Gustafsson & Ramsten, 2015; Linköping University, n.d.). The university has been viewing external collaboration as an integral part of core academic missions and as benefitting the societal partners yet ultimately increasing the quality of education and research (Linköping University, 2014). This vision served to emphasise the interdependence and complementarity of tasks, avoid the literal construction of societal collaboration as something that comes last on the list of priorities, and reduce the strategic mission stretch. However, it also rendered regional engagement indiscernible amidst core activities and external collaborations on other levels.

In the context of the changing EU-level policy discourses that shift the strategic attention of organisational leaders towards a comprehensive assessment of the universities' impact on regional innovation (Jonkers, Tijssen, Karvounaraki, & Goenaga, 2017), and in anticipation of upcoming national frameworks that might link funding to the universities' regional innovation performance, LiU is currently experimenting with institutional governance for regional engagement. To exemplify, it has launched a revision of its regional role that to date has been heavily focused on Linköping and Norrköping municipalities, and a smart specialisation matchmaking process that seeks to align university excellence areas with regional strengths. Earlier, it formed strategic partnerships with major public

and corporate players in the region and established a network of collaboration coordinators in academic units who were primarily responsible for collecting impact narratives from faculty members and for facilitating the flow of information between the strategic and the operational levels. Lastly, LiU central administration made collaboration part of the merit system, but this has had virtually no effect on engagement behaviours yet due to low awareness among the faculty and permissive interpretation at the level of recruitment and promotion committees. Overall, the management seems to approach engagement governance in an instrumental way, working with organisational roles and incentives rather than with disciplinary cultures and identities at the grassroots level.

The data collected for this study include 26 narrative interviews, both unstructured and semi-structured, with university managers and regionally engaged academics recruited via purposeful (experience of regional engagement or its governance, disciplinary background, and academic rank) and snowball sampling. To specify, 19 male and seven female participants; three participants in management roles, four participants in junior ranks combining academic and management roles, four participants in senior ranks combining academic and management roles, seven academics ranking from PhD students to associate professors, and eight full professors. Interviews took place on three campuses – the main campus in Linköping (18), the medical campus in Linköping (3), and the campus in Norrköping (5), – and represented various disciplines in the domains of humanities and social sciences (13), STEM (6), and health research (4). Participants were encouraged to share their professional biographies, reflect on their experiences of collaboration with regional partners, and/or tell about governance initiatives that were relevant for regional engagement. Data analysis combined standard thematic analysis with a narrative approach that regards participants' narratives as reflecting their identity and boundary work (cf. Maclure, 1996).

4. Academic 'boundary work' in a regionally engaged university

4.1.   Excellence vs. relevance

Participants in the study reported various kinds of engagement with the surrounding community. They received regional funding for research in certain strategic areas; created spin-off companies employing local workforce; arranged teaching and learning collaborations; assumed a public expert role when the local media approached them; took part in popular science activities, and so on and so forth. Working in a regionally engaged university, they generally did not feel any pressure from the central administration or national authorities to collaborate with partners on the grounds of geographical and relational proximity because collaborative activities were not as structured and institutionalised as the core missions were. In addition, participants would often express distrust that university services could assist them with resources like time or network building because these were not as tangible as patents and products. If they knew of governance initiatives at the strategic level, they would usually stress that this awareness was an exception to the rule among their colleagues.

Academics recruited for the study were certainly no 'ivory-tower' types insisting that the boundary between the university and its environment should not be crossed, or that they were crossing it involuntarily. They were eager to engage with the region because of research resources (funding, data, local networks); disciplinary considerations (e.g., a belief that social sciences should be relevant for society); departmental conditions (designated time for research communication and outreach); opportunities in the region (e.g., working with companies that have a regional focus); prosocial motivation (returning the public investment, making the local community a better place); and certain personal traits (being comfortable in intermediate positions or passionate about disseminating knowledge). Nevertheless, the 'ivory tower' image of a desk researcher doing basic science and writing academic papers was not entirely absent from narratives. It surfaced as an image of 'the Other' who could call into question their identity of a 'real academic', which revealed traces of the split between the basic and applied academic work, as well as the continuing importance of this frame of reference at the cultural-cognitive level, reinforced by bibliometric performance evaluations (the

participants knew the system was beginning to change, but the process was too slow and unclear to take it into account yet).

As identity claimants, regionally engaged participants found that crossing the boundary between the university and the region created tensions between the logics of academic excellence and societal relevance:

> It's kind of schizophrenic. You should be focusing on your research, but at the same time focusing on the development of what's happening outside university. How can you be excellent in both areas? Because they're going against each other in a way, because if I should focus on my own research then that's what I should do and become excellent in that. How do I become excellent? Well, it's a peer review. My peers are evaluating it, is this good or not? It's not the industry or municipalities or society that is judging that, but if they were, are they more correct than my peers? I don't know. (Junior academic with research, teaching, and management tasks)

> Is the research I'm doing good for my career or is it the research that is best for people...? It's not exactly the same thing always. Maybe it makes you think how you use the money, you're not wasting any of this money that's being raised by these people. (Junior academic with research and management tasks)

Such tensions were particularly hefty because of time constraints, both in the sense of 'task overload' and even a burnout mentioned by some, and in the sense of different temporal dynamics and expectations of time limits between the people inside and outside the university. However, these constraints were discussed without showing much emotion, as the academics had already accumulated experience in dealing with them. They developed personal time management strategies or benefitted from a respective course, many said they became strategic about selecting commitments, and a few were able to use their office hours for engagement tasks owing to specific arrangements within their divisions. One participant designed a publication strategy that would allow a steady flow of grant funding in shorter cycles over the long run to moderate the gap between the time horizons of research and funding programmes. The majority also emphasised they developed a skill of communicating the essence of their work and what can be expected from it to regional partners. On the group level, researchers would

sometimes optimise time by splitting activities between members concentrating on academic merits and local projects. A division highly engaged with public administration, for instance, announced they were looking for an applicant with an excellent research track and ability to attract international funding and collaborators to balance regional collaboration activities. Another participant involved in product development with commercial partners said they would segregate activities between themselves and the partners to protect the companies' interests and property rights, yet at the same time make sure junior researchers had publishable materials as soon as possible.

4.2. Boundaries and identities

The tension between academic excellence and regional relevance triggered identity and boundary work: where is the line between academic and non-academic activity, and which role(s) do I prefer? Participants' autobiographical identity narratives yielded four types of responses to these questions, which are presented below in the form of stylised scenarios.

Scenario I. Excellence above relevance

In the most widespread scenario, engagement was not necessarily sought by the person. The academic encountered opportunities for regional collaboration during PhD training, or was recruited to work on a PhD or postdoctoral project that was initiated by a supervisor or research leader and required interacting with regional stakeholders (industries, municipalities, hospitals, etc.) to achieve research goals. During the project, the (post)doctoral student was introduced to academic communities and university units that provided a model for collaboration, acquired generic collaboration skills and knowledge about regional phenomena, and established a personal network in the region. This facilitated a continuation of academic activities along the same lines after becoming an independent scholar whose career was advancing within the university walls, and the preferred identity role was that of a researcher over teaching and leadership tasks.

The boundary was very sharply drawn between research and consultancy. The research question was determined in dialogue with external partners, with the

intention to balance academic and practical interests and answer a real need, the 'so what?' question. By contrast, the analysis and end results had to comply with the ideal of disinterested and autonomous science – they needed to be independent and theoretically relevant, and they were communicated to the partners without assuming the responsibility for influencing the decision-making, driving a change, or trying to meet their expectations:

> *I'd say that I am an academic when I speak to them because I make it very clear that I would be doing this from another perspective, that I will not be in charge for changing things, that would be up to them... I will relate it to what has been done in other contexts or based on this and that theory, which I try to present in a comprehensive and understandable way.* (Senior academic with research and teaching tasks)

Consultancy work was not associated with 'dirty money', since funded research was likewise a source of individual salary (although having more basic vs. competitive funding was seen as very desirable); the problem with consultancy lied in short time spans, lack of follow-up evaluations, impact limited to one firm instead of a range of similar organisations, narrow orientation towards solving very concrete, not original, and therefore not interesting problems, and offering more experiential than research-based solutions. The fear of not being good enough as researcher in terms of norms and values (but not skills) was framed by this type of participants as having the reputation of 'a cheap consultant' among the academic peers. An additional line of defence was established in divisions hosting industrial PhDs and postdocs whose appointments were limited to one or two days per week – among other reasons, to restrict industrial and commercial infiltration and protect academic freedom.

Scenario II. Excellence with relevance

The second scenario was communicated by the participants nearly as often as the first one. In this case, the academic had some professional experience before entering the academic career – serving in the military, working in industry, business, public administration, NGOs, etc. In the academia, s/he was busy with all tasks at once and could claim multiple roles in front of external audiences (for instance, the dual role of researcher and academic manager and/or practitioner based on earlier

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background), but the current focus was on being/becoming a good researcher, and regional engagement was implemented on academic terms, as part of their academic work. At the same time, academic career was often described by this type of participants as suboptimal because of the priority given to doing relevant research in collaboration with regional partners that was slowing down publication activity. Some declared that professorship was not their ultimate goal in life in contrast to prosocial goals of making an impact on companies, municipalities, and the region at large: *"I wouldn't be motivated as a researcher if it would only be like something instrumental that didn't have any impact. I would like to make a difference and have an impact"* (Senior academic with a formal management role).

On a quest for 'excellence with impact', participants of this type went further in experimenting with the boundaries between the university and the region and tried to fuse knowledge, methods, and problems related to different tasks, or promote societal impact as part of the academic merit system. Nevertheless, they were also mindful about maintaining spatial-temporal distance from their regional partners, setting aside time for critical analysis and reflection and differentiating, again, between research and consultancy, only this time by locating consultancy work outside the campus. Namely, being a consultant was legitimate, only off campus and so that it would not interfere with employment at the university.

Scenario III. Relevance with excellence

In the third and less common for this study scenario, the participant went through a standard training and had an ambitious academic career, but was treating research on a par with other tasks inside the university, as well as actively working outside the university in different roles (entrepreneurship, consultancy, membership in regional boards, popularisation of science, etc.), even if they had limited research and teaching benefits. Here, the boundary between academia and the region was crossed more frequently and stretched further than in the two cases sketched above. Regional innovation or societal development work was done on its own terms and perceived as self-sufficient, and was evaluated against project targets, not academic outputs. Both internal and external activities were considered important and desirable because of their relevance for the surrounding community. With that, the academic of this type was careful about not mixing the

internal and external roles – for example, s/he would not work as consultant for companies already involved in joint research projects.

Scenario IV. Relevance above excellence

In the fourth and last scenario, the academic had a mixed professional background, including experiences that were not so distant from the university (e.g., working in a high school or a national research institute), but reported feeling estranged in the academic world, irrespective of the rank. This could be an industrial PhD student from the region or a professor running a company in the university's science park, united by thinking about leaving the university for the 'real world', or someone who had been deeply involved in teaching and administration and gradually moved to an essentially managerial or purely managerial role.

These people found it difficult to stay focused on just one task and organised their activity around multiple projects in different areas. In terms of professional identity, they would add their external occupation to self-definition (civil servant, engineer, journalist, etc.) and use the university as a resource for external engagements, or occupy a niche that would allow them to carry on with external activities on campus. As researchers, they evaluated themselves through the eyes of 'third parties': *"He [the boss] thinks I'm a good researcher. Sometimes I have to say to him I'm not a researcher yet... I'm not even sure if I will manage or pass the line"* (Junior academic); *"My boss thinks I'm a good researcher because he's the person I work closest with"* (Senior academic with a formal management role). They valued possibilities to solve 'real-world' problems and affect the decisions in organisations or product development. Accordingly, they wished the boundary between the university and its environment were more permeable, and could be critical of the norms and routines of the academy, trying to propagate institutional innovations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

It is outside the scope of a short paper written on the basis of qualitative evidence to discuss all premises of how academics in a regionally engaged university process identity tensions prompted by their experience of collaborating with regional partners, or to cover all instances of academic identity work. This study has

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therefore explored a specific case of the association between professional path and role impregnation, on the one hand, and the scenarios of academic boundary work and identity responses, on the other hand.

It is important to point out that the analysed scenarios should be applicable in the context of external collaborations beyond the regional dimension. While this research was concerned with academics contributing to the university's regional mission, they rarely exhibited a strong local identity and largely aimed at making an impact on a global scale, starting within the region out of coincidence or convenience. At the same time, these scenarios were necessarily situated, firstly, in the Swedish national policy context that preserved the 'professor's privilege' granting the academics the right to own the results of publicly funded research, was focusing their attention on strategic research areas, and was moving towards assessing the impact of academic work on top of its quality (cf. Wigren-Kristoferson, Gabrielsson, & Kitagawa, 2011); and secondly, they were situated in the organisational policies of Linköping University, a young innovative university that facilitated multi-disciplinarity, external collaborations, and valorisation of knowledge. Hence, they may not be seamlessly exported to differing contexts.

The four scenarios highlighted the connections between the boundary work typologies developed by Lam (2010, 2015), Leišytė (2015), and Whitchurch (2008, 2009), and the social construction of academic work. In the situation of low structuration of regional engagement on various policy levels and uncertainty concerning the expected performance, individual academics were actively probing the boundaries between the academy and the region and interpreting their roles in consultation with social referents (first and foremost, academic peers). The scenarios that emerged in the case study overlap with the types suggested in this literature, but also diverge from them because they accommodate non-academic professional backgrounds, non-scientific and non-commercial collaborations, as well as external roles.

In line with the findings of Jain *et al.* (2009) and Lam (2015), regionally engaged academics who concentrated on research work combined scientific rigour with local relevance without significantly altering their core identities. Those researchers who received standard academic training and those who had a more diversified professional background equally insisted on protecting research integrity and freedom, and were drawing a clear boundary between the norms and values of

their profession and the expectations and logics of regional partners. The two groups integrated co-creation of knowledge with regional actors into the hierarchy of professional values and located non-academic activities like consultancy across the boundary (cf. Wigren-Kristoferson *et al.*, 2011). However, these findings yield some qualification, as the scenarios differed in how far this boundary would extend. Researchers in the first group strategically prioritised academic outputs, while academics in the second scenario pursued 'excellence with impact' at the expense of their career progression.

Interestingly enough, in both scenarios, the researchers appealed to scientific methodology to legitimise their collaboration practices in the academic community and defend themselves from suspicion of bias. In social sciences, they relied on action research and 'interactive research' – the Swedish (and, more generally, Nordic) model of knowledge creation in collaboration with practitioners (Ellström, 2008). In this model, researchers and practitioners share the research object and research question, communicate research to the partners throughout the duration of the project, enrich each other's understanding and competencies, and create theoretically valid, internationally publishable knowledge that also addresses practical problems.

Research teams in different divisions and campuses of the case university adopted and personalised the methodological approach of 'interactive research', with an eye to each other. Doing this kind of research, they had to be strategic not only in manipulating practitioners' expectations and justifying the model for the colleagues in their own departments and research centres, but also in selecting publication outlets that would acknowledge this methodology as rigorous and in framing it for the international academic audiences that might not be familiar with it. Analogous developments could be found in engineering, where researchers could appeal to the model of technology readiness levels to explain themselves to the external public, or in France, where the 'intervention research' approach designed to enhance the relevance of academic knowledge for practitioners in management and organisational science, at one point, likewise struggled to be accepted in a wider academic community (Henri & Véronique, 2014). In all these cases, academics turned scientific methods and models into an instrument of boundary work to preserve their independence and distance themselves from professional consultancy.

In the third and the fourth scenarios considered in this paper, the boundary stretched towards letting more relevance-oriented practices into the academic world. Professionals invested in non-scientific academic tasks divided their time between the university and regional development, community outreach, and the like without subordinating them to their work on campus. While keeping internal and external roles separate, they drifted closer to the norms and values of 'post-normal science', such as extending peer community outwards and admitting 'fitness for purpose' to quality assessment criteria (Kønig, Børsen, & Emmeche, 2017). Professionals with mixed backgrounds and mixed role portfolios were fusing the boundaries between academic and external norms and practices, prioritising the 'real world' and trying to bring it in on campus. They were aware of their marginality vis-à-vis the academic heartland, and some pondered over leaving the university, while others played dual or blended roles.

It was quite predictable that some of the coordinators for collaboration, valorisation, and societal impact of academic work were recruited among employees in blended roles. These coordinators were appointed by the university central administration to facilitate two-way communication between the steering core and academic units. In theory, the experience of people in blended roles enables them to work as intermediaries with mixed portfolios and generate new work patterns (Whitchurch, 2009). In keeping with that, the role of collaboration coordinators required simultaneous familiarity with the domains of science, education, society, and administration, and a proactive attitude or ability to interpret and invent the role due to its innovative character and initial absence of activity scripts. Yet, despite the network of coordinators and other experiments in university governance for regional engagement mentioned in *Case Overview*, the distance between the top level and individual academics at the time of data collection remained approximately the same as before they were launched.

From the neo-institutional perspective, analysing the repertoire of academic identities lays the groundwork for affecting their development, meaning, dissemination, and change (March & Olsen, 1995). Knowing that identities and boundaries emerge on the premises of experiential impregnation and socialisation in academic communities, university leadership could reflect on how to organise contexts that would elicit exemplary identities and provide positive reinforcement for the values and practices of academics' regional engagement. For instance, it

could be possible to complement instrumental incentives like funding for regional projects, or accountability measures like criteria for recruitment and promotion, with symbolic and ceremonial incentives. Nowadays, it is common to adorn the walls in the corridors of the case university with academic posters, most cited and newly published works, white boards with grant application and teaching plans, student coursework, etc. External collaborations and regional impact remain dissolved in all that and are visible neither to the population on campus nor to visitors. Putting up a white board for external engagement could stimulate public discussion and evoke the corresponding roles more regularly.

Furthermore, given the influence of professional impregnation on academic boundary work, it should be possible to offer collaboration skill development as part of professional education and training. Collaboration skill was a subject of reflection in a couple of narratives, and was the subject matter of a course offered to PhD students by a team of collaboration coordinators. This reflection provided one more illustration of boundary work, as, according to those narratives, exercising this skill required the capacity to understand the needs of regional counterparts as much as resist them when they impinged on the standards of good research. The course, in its turn, served as an illustration of how academics in boundary-crossing and blended roles were making sense of their new function in the organisation and were offering their version of boundary work to early career researchers, thereby, perhaps, securing its dispersion and social continuity. To reiterate, more precise understanding of academic boundary work and role construction could aid with identifying the likely influences on academics' regional engagement behaviour and give strategic managers some leverage in designing suitable governance interventions (cf. Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 249). It is hoped that those interventions would buttress faculty involvement with regional partners and make the regional mission less peripheral in their perceptions and actions.

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