

Striving to Defend the Academic Profession: The University and College Union in English research-intensive universities

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Abstract. The purpose of the paper is to understand why academics' main association and trade union in England (University and College Union—UCU) is not stronger in its representation capacity, deepening knowledge regarding its role in the wider higher education sector. UCU operates in an adversarial context, claiming itself to be academics' main voice. However, UCU, as an association/union of academics, does not have a monopoly on representation, nor is the representation that it offers consistently strong. Applying a “Multiple Logics” perspective to this under-investigated topic within higher education, findings suggest that UCU is hampered by: 1) an increasingly heterogeneous academic workforce, resulting in contrasting interests; 2) an overriding cascade of managerialism in all ranks; 3) a widespread soloist mentality among academics; 4) an understanding of one's profession as in contrast with the idea of mobilization; 5) internal ideological conflicts among UCU activists.

Keywords: representation, trade unions, research-intensive universities, multiple logics, professional associations, professional organizations, England, University and College Union

Introduction

This paper faces the problem of representation of academics under neoliberal pressures. Although academics need more collective representation to control their own profession (hereafter *professionalism*), *managerialism* (the organizational design to control highly skilled and hyperspecialized employees' labour) appears to prevail, according to a vast pluri-decennial literature whose seminal initiator might be seen as Eliot Freidson (1984). Despite the volume of debate about managerialism (often known as neo-managerialism), almost never, at least in recent years, has the main collective body representing academics in England (University and College Union—UCU) been

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investigated. In this context, this paper investigates the reasons behind the uphill struggle that UCU is facing as a collective body.

The wider debate about representing a profession

According to wider literature, the attempt to introduce managerial practices in professional organizations is a fair definition of *hybrid professionalism*—a condition compelling professional employees to mediate, extricate themselves from, and even embody, managerial practices (Giacomelli, 2020). This situation is a byproduct of long-standing reforms of welfare under the name of neo-managerialism, with managerialism progressively eroding professionalism. Hospitals and universities are the clearest examples of this interplay between managerialism and professionalism, leaving professional staff (the academics, in universities) with a dearth of representation, or in a *contested terrain* in comparison to other, traditionally less prestigious, professions (Kirkpatrick et al., 2011; Nordstrand Berg & Byrkjeflot, 2014). Talking of respective representation, a first assumption would be that, since a coveted profession is under neoliberal pressures, more representation will occur to compensate for managerialism. A second assumption would foresee that less representation in an organizational arena will generate weaker membership (fewer and/or less engaged members) and more adherence to new collective entities (e.g., managerial roles, accreditations bodies, qualifications, etc.). Thus, the problem of representation is pivotal as it is the main way professional employees collectively pursue actual power within their organizations.

The problem of representation is only *prima facie* a dichotomy between professionalism and managerialism (Noordegraaf, 2015). Literature informs us that actual employees' professional practice is more often a result of co-existence, co-optation, mediation, negotiating, merging, and (strategic) adaptation, rather than identifiable clashes, hegemony, and resistance (Numerato et al., 2012). Notwithstanding, in hybrid professional practice, representation potentially remains multiple, undetermined by changes, and fragmented.

Research design

In addressing this topic empirically, we use a *multiple logics* approach (Greenwood et al., 2011)—a suitable concept to analyse coexisting forces in contradiction to each other. Specific systems require accounting for national changes (Noordegraaf, 2011). Contextual legacy—or history about the main bodies regulating the sector—is relevant in shaping these coexisting forces and in explaining the current situation. Another important factor is *plurality*. Plurality of interpretations regarding how the job and the whole profession ought to be pursued is typical in professional organizations (Dunn & Jones, 2010). Arguably this plurality is present in the English higher education system—a long-standing forerunner system in terms of managerialism applied in academia. Nevertheless, plurality

generates possible tensions. Tensions between management and professional employees (for instance, senior and middle managers *qua* employers, and professional representation *qua* union, respectively) may remain in balance (Reay & Hinnings, 2009) or fall into disequilibrium (Scott et al., 2000). Higher education under neoliberal aegis is more likely to fall into the latter case (Kirkpatrick & Ackroyd, 2003). Representation and negotiation capacities are worthy of attention because plurality in professional organisations is not *per se* a problem. Instead, representation and negotiations may optimise overall performance (Kraatz & Block, 2008).

The operationalization of this paper draws from literature on *negotiating processes* in representative associations (Greenwood et al., 2002). Especially within professional organizations, negotiation is not a matter of working conditions only. It is a matter of professionals inhabiting conditions to perform to their potential. Acknowledging extant literature which argues that English higher education is characterised by an ‘estranged’ type of multiple logics (Besharow & Smith, 2014, see Table 1 and 2), this paper looks inside the box of UCU branches—a *black* box analysed for the first time. This takes the form of the highly informed perspective of UCU ‘Lay Representatives’ (hereafter Reps). The case of research-intensive institutions, in particular, is suitable to examine the ambivalence highlighted in literature about the two driving forces exposed in the incipit: deprofessionalisation (demise of professionalism) from one side, and managerialization (rise of managerialism, or neo-managerialism) on the other side. Quoting Pernicka and Reichel (2014) “deprofessionalisation tends to increase highly skilled employees’ propensity to join trade unions, while a dominance of market logic appears to contribute to a reluctance to become a union member”. Interviews focus also on respective *cultural claim-making* (Spillman & Brophy, 2018)—meaning the capacity to define what is relevant within professional practice.

Following Table 1, which acknowledges the poor historical and ongoing negotiating/representation capacity of UCU (see next section for full description), this paper addresses the following operative research questions: *a*) how does UCU exercise its role?, *b*) which function(s) is UCU is more likely to enact (e.g., union vs. association), *c*) which identity do members feel that they have?, *d*) what facilitates/hampers mobilisation and why?, and *e*) how does internal governance work? These questions aim at giving an holistic answer regarding the potential reasons behind UCU’s struggle in influencing the English higher education sector.

The paper is organized in the following way. The next section offers a brief history of UCU. The methodology and “How does UCU exercise its role?” sections relay the main primary qualitative data. The discussion section zooms back to the main implications for wider professional employees’ conditions in relation to representation. Conclusions provide novel insights about the situation academic employees and the academic profession are facing today in England.

Table 1. A typology of multiple logics comprising conflict

Degree of centrality	Degree of compatibility	
	<i>Logics provide contradictory prescriptions for action</i>	<i>Logics provide compatible prescriptions for action</i>
<i>High - Multiple logics are in equilibrium</i>	Contested - Extensive conflict	Aligned - minimal conflict
<i>Low - One Logic ('Employers' side' in this case) is core and other(s) ('Union one') is/are peripheral</i>	Estranged - moderate conflict, mostly because the core component does not allow the weak one to emerge, nor the weak is able to pursue an open conflict. Negotiating process is also weak	Dominant - no conflict

Source: adapted from Besharow & Smith, 2014

The Association of University Teachers, and the University and College Union: a brief discussion of a one-Century Trajectory¹

The representation of academics by academics has not been constant across the decades in England. This representation capacity has followed a trajectory of progressive ‘estrangement’ (See Table 2). AUT was established as an association in 1909. Until the death of its founder in 1953, AUT remained an amateur association, committed to discussing positions on behalf of academic staff, mostly at the institutional level, while *other* academics had the charge to rule the university. At the national level, the University Grant Committee (UGC) and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP)—today Universities UK (UUK)—built the national higher education system (Berdahl, 1959).

Since WWII, the funding mechanism for higher education was increasingly managed by the UGC, a body that, at the time, was still in its *buffer and benign* mode, and substantially an extension of the scholars’ world (Shattock, 1994). At the end of the 1960s, AUT also became large enough to acquire the label of a ‘*professional professional union*’ (Perkin, 1969) [italics in the original]. According to Perkin’s analysis, if AUT was relevant, it was not due to its organisational assets, nor necessarily to its density: rather, because it was considered by the academic leaders to be a decent player with whom to discuss relevant queries. *Other scholars* within UGC and CVCP held the issues, occasionally appeasing AUT in a benevolent manner. This relationship became clearer especially whenever AUT tried to bypass UGC’s or CVCP’s voices to bargain with the Treasury directly (Shattock, 2012, p. 119) or tried to establish other venues of debate (Berdahl, 1959). AUT was not at the summit of the national hierarchy, though this hierarchy was mostly collegial and academically dominated.

In the 1970s, AUT did not keep pace with some important structural changes; the Department for

¹ In this paper, the abbreviation UCU is used to refer to the trade union established from a merger between the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and NATFHE – the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education Union in 2006 (UCU, 2019). The commentary in this paper concerns the higher education component of UCU since the establishment of the UCU, or AUT if information regards any time before 2005.

Education dictated the general ends and how the system should work (Shattock, 1994). In the 1970s, AUT members did not want to ‘bite’ too much, preferring to continue to be ‘colleagues fostering suggestions’, rather than to embody the role of representatives struggling for better working conditions (Stuttard, 1992). AUT behaved like a traditional union in those years only with respect to salary issues, remaining ultimately an association, whereas the UGC and other players progressively increased their status via strategic appointments. At the beginning of 1980s, AUT went back to focusing on institutional issues just when things started to become more nationally driven (Shattock, 1994). As a result, AUT became less effective in tackling a new adversarial season of cuts. During the 1980s and 1990s, AUT remained a consultative body, often a weak one, failing to gain (or failing to aspire to) the role of a union, preferring a ‘paternalistic’ role (Simpson, 1984). This stance resulted in it losing its grip in relation to structural changes in the sector.

The advent of new human resources practices in the 1990s paved the way to a new function, that of—albeit sporadic—strikes, boycotts and overt recriminations (Wilson, 1991). As neo-managerialism progressed until the drastic reform of income-contingent fees in 2011 (Shattock, 2012), it is worth noting the opposition that UCU formed in response to the 2006 reforms, setting up more confrontational tones (Callicos, 2006). Overall, according to Bucklew et al. (2012), AUT appears to have been a *permissive* body during the first decades of its activity. Progressively, though not linearly, AUT/UCU then assumed more often a less *symbiotic* role. Recent events are worth noting. The 2018 University Superannuation Scheme (USS) strike (and following actions currently still ongoing) is at the same time a national, material issue, affecting all academic employees. The decision by Universities UK (UUK) to propose financialisation of USS without consultation of UCU brought about a sharp clash. UCU rose to public attention, also beyond higher education. In just a few weeks, UCU recruited some 16,000 new members, all in its higher education component. This growth can be better appreciated if we look at membership trends since the establishment of UCU. In 2007, for the first elections of general secretary (Sally Hunt), 116,512 ballot papers were sent, rising to 117,918 in 2012 (UCU, 2019). In March 2017, only 101,497 members were eligible to vote for the general secretary (UCU, 2019), a net loss of almost 20,000 members in a span of time when the number of academics increased. However, at the elections of General Secretary Jo Grady in 2019, UCU distributed 115,311 ballot papers. UCU also acquired notable attention in mass media, forcing the association of the ‘employers’ (UUK) to take a step back, proposing a more collegial and balanced body in reforming and managing the pension scheme. The reform of USS entering into force in October 2021 is considerably different from the initial UUK proposal—meaning that UCU has been effective in negotiating a smaller increase for staff contributions to the pension scheme. Nevertheless, in November 2021 UCU called another strike. Numbers about this recent event are relevant. Overall, the UK higher education sector has some 180,000 full time equivalent academic staff. Only around two-thirds of this total was in the position to participate in the vote whether to strike or not. Some universities are in the position to block this democratic exercise pursuant current legislation in

England—only those UCU branches who got at least 50% of members voting for the call can organize a strike. The mailout for this vote was 50,443. Some 26,858 members returned the ballot, which is 53.2% of those who got the possibility to vote. 20,521 were in favour of the strike, a 76.4% majority. However, this also implies that those wanting to strike were: only 40.6% of UCU members in universities where the strike was under consideration, less than 17% of total academics working in universities where voting was possible, and just 9.2% of total academic staff in the UK. Strikes eventually happened in the first months of 2022. In September and October 2022, another round of ballots is in place: mailout rose to 70,000+ and the turnout increased to 60.2% for the USS issue, with 84.9% voting “yes” to strike. Therefore, the percentage over the total academic staff more than doubled, reaching 20%.

For decades, fragmentation of union members has prevailed, and a strong sense of distinction for one’s primary status (i.e., broadly speaking research-intensive vs. teaching-intensive institutions) has remained. In contrast to this fragmentation, density is much higher in post-1992 universities (70%-80%), but differences persist according to institutions and historical legacy. In some pre-1992 institutions, the percentages may struggle to reach 20%, whilst density has been around 25%-30% in pre-1992 universities throughout the 1990s (Shattock, 2001). Political representation of members has been slightly in favour of the Labour Party in recent decades, whereas even in the 1970s many members of the AUT were Conservative (Williams, Blackstone & Metcalf, 1974, p. 285-296). Density varies also according to disciplinary field, STEM disciplines being the most negatively affected. Currently, the UCU is overtly divided by political orientations (typically between moderate left and more radical left).

In synthesis, UCU can be seen also as a weakening player within the *professional negotiating or representation arena* (Greenwood et al., 2002), having this representation capacity shifted progressively in the hands of CVCP/UUK. The latter body is more successful in introducing itself as the speaker of universities, which reflects a trend towards lower degrees of *centrality*, contributing to make English higher education an ‘estranged’ type from a multiple logics perspective (see Table 2). Notably, over time, fewer academics have filled CVCP/UUK ranks. Also, senior managers of single universities are majority composed of non-academics. In this regard, Shattock (2014) declares the academic profession *diluted*. Whitchurch and colleagues (2023) focus on the residual agency of individuals, reporting a diffuse sense of seeking one’s own opportunities and poor sense of a collective profession as a whole.

Table 2. Players of the English academic professional representation bodies: a long period trend

	Academics presence within the body	Strength	Role within Professional association
UGC/ HEFCE/Office for Students	Less. Funding body passed from being substantially chaired by academics into a technical-bureaucratic body	Empowered. From allocation of extra funding at institutional level, into the main funding driver	From a benign buffer body into the main driver of steer at the distance player
CVCP/ UUK	Less. Dominated originally by senior academics, now only a minority of senior managers are academics	Empowered. It represents the main voice of higher education sector	Increasingly as the <i>employer mode</i> of the association, but also the hegemonic ('leaders') player
AUT/ UCU	Less. Though populated by academics, density decreased	Lessened. The association has lost grip within the profession and contextual conditions have worsened	Increasingly – though not univocally – as the <i>union (last resort) mode</i> of the profession

Sources: (Berdahl, 1959; Shattock, 2012; Perkin, 1987)

Methodology

The experience of Reps from eight English research-intensive higher education institutions, both belonging to the Russell-Group and other research-intensive institutions ('other than Russell-Group pre-92'), constitutes the source of primary data. Reps offer an informed and expert point of view, despite being also partial. Notwithstanding, the paper assumes their self-critical and diverse thoughts as valid in understanding the UCU's role in the current higher education system. Reps at institutional levels are those employees in the best position to know about branch issues. It is important to note that the majority of UCU members are non-active members, joining meetings only occasionally, and becoming more aware of particular situations when they concern their own personal interests (e.g., rejected promotions, redundancies, etc.). In this sense, a different research design engaging with UCU members would have had several limitations and would not have offered an original contribution, as the majority of UCU reports are primarily based on surveys of their members. Non-academic Reps (people not in research nor in teaching, sometimes unionists by profession and active in higher education due to previous experiences) are scarcely researched, but useful in understanding academics' specific mind-set from an original point of view. Research designs involving academics, including non-UCU members, would enrich knowledge about representation. Yet, to interview managers at several levels, and senior HR positions, would represent an heuristic advantage. All these targets represent possible future lines of research.

Twenty-six respondents were interviewed between 2015 and 2016, including one regional unionist of UCU (geographical regions represent the link between institutional branches and the national level). Among the interviewees, gender equilibrium, different nationalities, academic contracts and cohorts (from people in their mid-thirties through retired professors/employees) were considered to capture different points of view (see Table 3). Some Reps have long experience dating back the 70s, embodying a useful position to give original insights into changes within the system.

Table 3. Scheme of the interviewees

Code of HEI	Total interviewees	Non-British/ total	Female / total	Reader or above / total	Non-scholars/total	Predominantly in teaching
A	6	16%	50%	33%	16%	16%
B	4	0%	75%	75%	0%	0%
C	3	33%	33%	66%	0%	33%
D	2	50%	50%	100%	50%	0%
E	3	33%	33%	66%	0%	33%
F	2	50%	50%	50%	0%	0%
G	2	50%	50%	50%	0%	0%
H	3	33%	66%	33%	0%	0%
UCU	1	---	---	---	---	---
Total	26	27%	52%	56%	8%	12%

Source: Own elaboration

A ‘travelling metaphor’ was used in leading the interviews and data analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), accepting that reality reported and told by interviewees is intrinsically partial and possibly disputable by other Repts, and that facts may be mixed with opinions. This stance favoured disclosure of sensitive episodes that otherwise would have remained unobserved. Thus, the process of thinking about data, also between single interviews, was dominated by the necessity to reflect about unexpected features, the most delicate of which was probably evidence about internal conflicts within UCU at branch (and national) levels, and respective balance in terms of interviewees. This latter aspect deserved more attention to account thoroughly the implications for representation—mobilization and identities (see next section).

The broad open questions proposed to interviewees considered: one’s personal motivation in joining AUT/UCU, the main problems in defending academic employment, the problems in attracting new members, the most (and the least) successful actions in defending employees’ interests, and the relationship with the employer (e.g., senior/middle managers). As data saturation was achieved at the eighth institutional case, no further interviews have been scheduled.

In treating data, an abduction process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Richardson & Kramer, 2006) produced four dimensions: the role of the UCU over time (*functions*), the perception of the UCU among scholars (*identity*), the reasons for the relatively low participation in membership (*mobilisation*), and internal problems within the UCU (*conflicts*).

Evidence. How does UCU exercise its role?

This section considers the evidence collected in response to the research questions raised in the introduction. The overall message is synthesised in Table 4.

Functions

The very first impression that a non-academic had of AUT in the 1970s was that of a ‘boys’ club’

(A.2). In that perception, AUT was ‘an association of professionals and not a trade union’ (C.3; A.6). Moreover, it was, in the eyes of a person who had no ambitions to be academic, a sort of ‘conservative association, not necessarily in a politics sense’ (C.2), and a male-dominated context. AUT failed to become completely a union, but neither did it remain just an association, as the eldest Reps report. There is general agreement that now UCU has a quite general ‘union function’ within the higher education sector, but part of this ‘being [a] regular union’ is due to the Further Education component, and much less to the higher education one². Especially research-intensive institutions are less ‘union-like’. Even the Labour Party, many Reps say, has traditionally been more sympathetic to further education rather than higher education. The unity of UCU itself is critical, undermining a univocal definition of UCU in terms of location in the political spectrum. For instance, B.3 says that:

‘Sally [Hunt – first general secretary of UCU in charge until her resignation for sickness in 2019, previously general secretary of AUT] is reckoned to be a Blair’s Labour style person. She is ok, but she is considered to be a weak leader [from many radicals’ point of view]’. Hunt is considered by some Reps to need ‘a change of perspective [...]: [UCU] became a much more progressive union, I’m not saying radical, but more modern oriented’ (C.3).

In other words, UCU remained, to some extent, a player with two possible functions—possibly dividing scholars in an attempt to unify them under a unique voice. In this case, an eventual shift from association to union is blurred by the common trait of being scholars: ‘they join, but later they don’t fight together if they disagree upon, or dislike, an issue’ (C.2).

According to older UCU Reps, the changes within the system made potential participation even more scarce and sparse, conveying a more general ‘selfish and free rider’ attitude among people (A.5). As a matter of fact, nowadays, UCU is perceived as “a ‘service organisation’ rather than a ‘collective organising body’” (C.2).

Although UCU remains a firmly institution-based union (the institutional dimension is defended by all Reps as a matter of autonomy and prestige), the regional level retains a substantial role. However, regional coordinators may trigger a formal action only when a good single case is prepared. According to Reps, to have the support of the regional level yields the few occasions when UCU obtains clear victories, typically on single cases via obtaining fair compensation. This regional level is commonly deemed to be the ‘union function’, whereas the institutional level can take on plural functions.

In synthesis, UCU is seen today primarily as a ‘protecting insurance’ (E.2) or as a ‘workplace insurance’ (C.2), albeit with ‘no industrial [relation] muscles’ (C.6). Second, it provides a guarantee for people when they face troubles, as a just-in-case body to resort to when most needed. Third, academics who become members are those who are sympathetic to the political affiliation and/or the social representation it gives (i.e., “being somewhere on the Left”). Fourth, UCU is perceived as a kind

² This is explained by the organizational structure of further education, whose teachers are more similar to secondary education ones in many respects. Unionization derives from this accordingly.

of ‘friendly society: they may go to your events as if [those] events were social events’ (E.2). The first two points recall a union, the latter two a more traditional association. These points are constant among the interviewees from different universities. They may also overlap each other. Overall, plurality of functions is widespread (see Table 4).

Identity

Identity refers to how UCU members are perceived within the academic profession. Reps consistently highlight the role of a heterogeneous corpus of academics nowadays, not only in contractual conditions, but even in terms of how UCU is recognised:

We [Reps] are not seen more probably as partners, rather as enemies [...]. Generally, [scholars] are very suspicious about us. (H.1)

There are some [colleagues] who don’t believe that the union represents them, that UCU speaks for them, and this is a problem if we get legal advice because we are not [legally] allowed to talk to them. (UCU.1)

These quotations have multiple possible explanations. One is ideological, referring to the political positions with which UCU is more commonly associated. Specifically, UCU activists are perceived as being inclined to the left of the political spectrum, failing to represent many academics, ideologically. Another reason lies in the fact that those in higher education, and even more those in research-intensive institutions, are more likely to self-recognise themselves as a selection of an élite. Furthermore, ongoing ‘Americanisation’ (A.1) of English higher education has fostered the expectation that even in the case of a personal failure in a distinguished university, other opportunities may easily arise in the UK or elsewhere. The combination of these factors creates and reinforces a—widely lamented by Reps—sense of individualism:

People are becoming more conflicting but, at the same time, it is hard to make people act in such a way, even in teaching. They continue to do it in a soloist way (H.2).

Higher education is different [from other sectors]. Our members believe it is different. Many of them believe they are unique. It’s a delusion of grandeur [to don’t consider higher education a sector like any other] (UCU.1).

These perceptions are reinforced by the way scholars introduce themselves: everything is about ‘one’s research’, ‘one’s pipeline’, ‘one’s grants’ (B.3) or one’s ‘promotion and career’ (A.6). Especially non-academic Reps complain about this widespread cultural assumption and the ‘shocking lack of solidarity’ among scholars (C.1). The negative consequence of this higher status membership is that unionised people are equated to ‘troublemakers’ (F.1). There is a general fear that one would be met with disappointment if he/she joined the union. No less importantly, there is ‘a British [implicit] assumption. Scholars are seen as professionals who should not complain and that it would be

embarrassing to complain. People don't want to appear like poor people' (E.2). The same Rep reports that once she posed the exact question to someone, that person replied that 'It would be ungrateful [to join the UCU] towards the seniors and senior management [who gave me this permanent position]'.

The way academic hierarchy applies—from the senior management until the large base of research students—is critical in enacting representation practices, according to many Reps' points of view. All Reps answered the question about 'Which is the role of seniors academics and middle managers in relation to UCU?', indicating ambivalence as to whether they are 'friends' or 'foes' of UCU. This fact reinforces the suitability of hybridism in describing the current field of forces. Hybridism is more accentuated in some ranks. In Reps' opinions, middle managers and professorial staff are intrinsically ambivalent: many professors have some responsibilities and intertwined links with both the above managerial layers, and the bottom. In other terms, senior academics might be in a favourable position to mediate some conflicts. More often, they just do not engage to avoid open conflicts. Many Reps describe scholars as generally eager to avoid conflicts.

In all institutions under examination, Reps universally underlined that the demanding pressures of the top of the institution towards middle managers, sometimes enacting a domino effect. This problem, especially in STEM disciplines, was defined as 'mirroring' (in the sense of replicating, expressed by G.1) managerial, or neoliberal, academic behaviour. An example may clarify the phenomenon: seniors and managers may subject lecturers to demanding targets. Consequently, in turn, that lecturer expects the same standards from his/her PhD students, spreading a culture aimed at boosting outputs and performance. In Reps' words, a 'culture of success at all costs', 'dreaming to accomplish challenging goals' and 'competitiveness' (as often expressed explicitly from several Reps) all significantly reduce any perspective of being part of a cohesive academic association. The general pattern is that academics are not unified against a clearly identifiable 'employer'. Academics, mostly in any rank-and-file position, live in a complexity of interlocked compelling forces of competition and collaboration at the same time. Translated into the everyday work of a Rep, the presence of, at least partially, overlapping interests prevents UCU to even come to know about potential grievances. Plurality of identities influences both mobilisation and internal conflicts (See Table 4).

Practicing the academic profession along with managerial duties engenders a critical disjuncture, with the interests of the broader academic community on one side, and individual academic and personal targets on the other side. This combination of factors implies that UCU members (especially activists) are identified as the ones betraying 'the guild', rather than persons trying to preserve and protect such a guild. As a result, UCU activists may fail to represent academics for the following reason: radical activists are more prone to consider an overt confrontation with the employer/management, whereas other Reps work—at least up to a certain point—to play down clashes or to mediate.

The identity of UCU is particularly relevant when critical events occur. Only in these circumstances academics are more likely to realise that managerial choices can disrupt their working

conditions. It is in response to confrontations with specific and common threats that a sense of being in a 'guild' re-emerges. In the case of a redundancies plan, for instance, any possible redundant academic may look at the local Rep as 'the Messiah' (H.2). Nevertheless, Rep H.2 explained that he could only rebuke a colleague explaining that his/her membership 'is arriving too late'. A Rep explained with the following metaphor: '[New members believe] UCU is a lifeboat, but what we may offer is just a life belt' (E.3).

The following quotation neatly concludes the difficulties in matching identities of academics with the identity of being member of UCU:

At the end [of a discussion inside the institutional branch], an anonymous survey was launched online in order to collect some feedback [in 2009, outside London]. We asked if people [non-members of the circle of activists] felt represented by UCU. The results were not so pleasant... (G.2)

This last quotation is useful to appreciate the extent to which UCU members, especially activists, may fail to represent the profession in the eyes of the non-members. Non-members may see UCU as an arena for activism based on *self-selection*, rather than based on *organizing* (McAlevey, 2016).

Mobilisation

Mobilisation is often a matter of *a priori* choice. Many of the active members come from families whose parents were active in a union. Others may have thought to join a union as a matter of principle. For non-British interviewees (three out of four non-UK national interviewees are EU nationals), joining UCU was an almost self-evident choice, dictated by one's cultural expectations. Another strong predictor of commitment is one's political views, albeit political ideas among Reps differ. The main elections of the Reps usually follow a predictable trajectory: the procedure for elections is a formality, nominating the few persons who may have attended branch committees regularly, which is also known as a *privilege of presence* in movements studies. This aspect was found to be a matter of complaint at the regional level, associated with a weakening of overall representation capacity. There are two main reasons for this: 1) the more elections are not an occasion of real participation, the weaker the branch; and 2) the more people become Reps based on personal commitment, the more likely they are politically oriented to the far left. Consequently, the more a committee branch is not representative of the wide spectrum of scholars' political/ideological thoughts, the more UCU local committees are seen as non-representative of all academics (See Table 4). This phenomenon echoes the difference between *mobilizing* and *organizing* (McAlevey, 2016), the former being a *de facto* hindrance to the latter.

All Reps denounce that recruiting new members is very hard and frustrating. A single episode of successful mobilisation is the following:

When I was PhD student, I had a problem at [previous university: E]. The contract they ‘encouraged’ us to have as teachers was exploitative. They [Heads of Department and seniors] wanted us to teach almost for free, and they also turned angry as far as I personally complained. They used to say: ‘This is an opportunity for you [to teach and make the experience], and this is the way to repay me?’ [...] I was framed to be troublemaker, because I was able to unionise some 70 people in the same condition in the institution, mobilising them one by one... At the end, I won because they had to listen to us, but I also left that place and now I am here at A.

This experience was led by—at that time—PhD students in a very spontaneous way, notably without much support from the branch of that institution, at least at the beginning. This interviewee got more support from the branch once she got a list of new members to support negotiation prospects. This episode of recruiting from the bottom is nevertheless sporadic, as nobody else in the other seven institutions was able to recall a similar mobilisation/organizing practice, not even if based on a specific concomitant problem (e.g., redundancies).

According to some interviewees, potential members remain unaffiliated to UCU because they don’t even think a union can be effective in the contemporary English system. Reps testify of people believing in unions as a tool belonging to the twentieth century, even when they might be eager to take part in a collective action. However, other external aspects also influence the scenario.

One of these aspects is the increasing uncertainty in achieving a secure position, which may cause the wide bottom of the academic pyramid to remain under-engaged from the union:

Some people don’t have the luxury to participate in UCU as an active member, because they may have a mortgage and as a lecturer you’d better to think about your house and not about justice. Justice is becoming a luxury. (F.2)

Another reason for weak mobilisation is the number of personnel in part-time positions, or in other non-standard contracts, especially in teaching, which is not entirely a novelty in the system (Conley & Stewart, 2008). This example may suffice to clarify:

When I came here [C], AUT was not really interested in people like me involved just in teaching. [...] In 2004 [...] AUT was not so interested in part-timers [either], but to be fair, at that time there were many fewer people who were part-timers. (C.1)

The diffusion of a prototype of the successful academic whose goal is to boost performance and excellence is in contrast with the idea of being employees in the first place. According to Reps’ impressions, this leads to possible biases: ‘People don’t think they are regular workers, even if they become precarious workers. People don’t think [of themselves] as workers at all’ (D.2). Many Reps tend to see academics as self-exploitative workers. Reps also struggle to make colleagues realise certain strict contractual obligations which might allow them to work less, or to claim better conditions. Moreover, an increasing share of academics from other countries, especially extra-European ones, may not see a union as a positive player, or even a legal player. This is a prospect of harshening conditions in which UCU operates, especially in the post-Brexit scenario (Locke & Marini, 2021).

Wider representation capacity is hampered also by the perception of academics (we continue to refer to Reps' voices) that UCU disproportionately defends 'poor devils', or that it tends to defend with genuine commitment only the most embedded members. This exacerbates the feeling by non-members that UCU is a relatively enclosed niche within the English higher education system, and not an association open to the whole academic profession. Rep C.1 described the case of another Rep who, by that time, had become research-inactive and had below average performance. This condition was framing him as a person subject to redundancy. UCU in that case was able to get a very generous lump-sum for his redundancy. At the same time, other academics knowing the whole story, and the alleged bad temper of the person in question, realized that the union itself can be unequal, overprotecting somebody at expense of, albeit indirectly, somebody else. This type of dynamic also may have a discouraging effect on membership campaigns.

Overall, UCU suffers poor mobilisation. As B.1 affirms with some irony, 'the best recruiter we have is a bad Head of Department'. Other circumstances, like the USS dispute, result in sudden increase in the membership, coherent with the prior sub-section about *identity* which identified that a cogent issue affecting everybody at the same time can engender higher expectations for representation, also enhancing mobilisation.

Internal conflicts

As already mentioned, some internal conflicts within UCU have always been latent, remaining unresolved. The national dimension merely reflects this dynamic, while regional committees enjoy perhaps more visibility:

In these national and regional committees, they [participants] fight, they fight for small differences. It's like a bold man fighting over a cow. Basically, they fight ideological battles. It's a kind of left, and left-left, and left-left-left division. They denounce each other about how should they behave with the employer. They end by making the union less effective (C.1).

This general situation can be explained by the desire of radical activists to maintain a political arena. Most of the interviewees (usually the non-radicals) are aware of the negative consequences of these conflicts and claim more 'elastic' commitment to 'let all members feel less under activists' words' (E.1). Another Rep complains that divisions are often presented as 'too black-and-white' (D.2). Even internal democratic procedures are a hot issue, as digital votes might increase participation, according to some Reps. Probably not by chance, some radicals have not favoured this initiative, some Reps maintain. A critical case was reported by D.2, who had to fight to reach an attendance of 100 members in her institution to reverse the situation previously dominated by 'radicals'. In fact, small groups of activists may be hegemonic at institutional branch level. Branch committees are arenas for 'people who are keen in interrupting other people' (E.2) and it is 'extremely sectarian and bitter to stay in [a branch committee]' (A.6). A final observation regarding the tensions within UCU and its

incapability to stay united is the following:

UCU has had a lot of tensions between [omission / ‘one of the minorities’] and others. There are personal problems, never been resolved. [...] To me it was particularly difficult, because I was not allied with the ‘far Left’ but I felt that one or two persons who were denied assistance really had good cases and I would have supported at least one of them. [...] It was an awkward situation (C.3).

The quest for institutionalising minorities within branches is, in fact, an issue already reported in literature (Bennett, 2010). Arguably, the interplay of these internal conflicts does not favour the mobilisation of heterogeneous and “hybrid” professionals like academics (Table 4). New members subscribing to UCU don’t alleviate this dynamic as heterogeneity of membership is higher. Moreover, in recent years, also after data collection, several calls for strikes and internal debates therein confirm the critical dilemma between prioritising fights or resolutions to improve wider grass-root involvement.

Discussion: what hampers UCU negotiating capacity? And what is the wider lesson for employees in hybrid organizations?

In its context, UCU, at least so far, has been more often a resistant player, with this resistance not necessarily being good or bad for the sake of their members’ interests. Its capacity to negotiate (or mediate) appears to have lessened across time, arguably primarily because the locus of power has always been elsewhere, and progressively more distant. As a matter of evidence, UCU couldn’t and can’t, at least alone, hold the monopoly in representing the profession. Over time the ‘employers’ side’ has become more cohesive and legitimized through new roles (Tapper & Salter, 1997), leaving UCU ‘estranged’ (Besharow & Smith, 2014).

This is the context. However, how could UCU cope with this situation, if we look at it from within? There is a web of intertwined factors explaining relatively poor representation (see Table 4). The more the functions UCU enact are dictated by members’ opinions, the larger the gamut of identities UCU reproduces. As a result, *identities* are plural and, at the same time, only individualism is a common denominator. Identities don’t change easily. The more that mobilisation is disproportionately committed by the few more extreme activists, the more the identity of UCU members risks becoming that of ‘troublemakers’ and ‘poor devils’ from non-members’ perspectives – a pejorative position. In the sudden case of booming membership either at national or at institutional level, UCU might gain back both visibility and some degree of success, at least in terms of visibility. Nevertheless, heterogeneity of members, especially new ones added on top of the already existing ones, increases internal conflicts and hampers unity. Internal conflicts also prevent more successful mobilisation: by discipline, especially in sciences; by type of contract, especially among the less secure career tracks. These differences echo earlier findings about the extent to which several features among academics affect their propensity to engage with unions (Katchanovski et al., 2011). These

conditions are in line with UCU effectiveness as a union (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005) and chime with Blader (2007) who found that identification with the union-organising group is an important predictor of engagement with the union. The trade-off between activism and professional unity under UCU appears structural and specific to this type of professional organization, with only sporadic experiences of *organizing* (McAlevey, 2016). Low participation in activities, campaigns, and initiatives, appears in contradiction with wider participation. This is manifest especially where density at institutional level is lower. Last, identity and internal conflicts feed each other: internal conflicts tend to frame a perceived identity (included among non-members) that is far from that of a highly prestigious and cohesive profession.

Table 4. A dynamic model of the dimensions

<i>Links as showed in Fig.1</i>	<i>Explanation of process</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Functions ↔ Identity	Multiple functions is cause and explanation of heterogeneity of needs/ expectations by members	Differences in teaching only and other personnel (all cases); part-timers vs. standard workers in cases "C" and "B". Cultural diversities (nationalities) in "D"
Identity → Mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitation in joining dictated by (keeping) prestigious affiliation • Loyalty to next upper hierarchy (i.e. one's P.I. or Middle Manager) • Individualism • Bias of invulnerability due to high status • Bias of capability of coping with by oneself 	Widely reported by all reps and UCU regional leader in denouncing example of possible action that don't take place or and not well attended; difficulties in documenting properly cases; memberships acquired only "in case" and "when it's too late" (i.e., case of redundancy in "H").
Mobilisation → Identity	UCU membership in research intensive institutions as "a paddock for poor devils"	Especially present in sciences; much less in social sciences and humanities. A structural problem in cases "G" and "F".
Internal Conflicts ↔ Identity	Divisions structured in factions AUT/UCU seen as the domain of the left, with harsh divisions therein	Institutional branches at "A", "E" and especially "D" where "radicals" ends to keep the union sectarian (moderate left reps' opinions).
Internal Conflicts ↔ Mobilisation	Low active participation among members. Divisions about how to tackle problems.	Strikes and other sort of public activities are pursued usually by the most active people of the branch; problems of elections of Reps in branches which result to nominee the few regular attendants.

Source: own elaboration

Wider lessons about representation of hybridism in professional organizations

What is the main lesson that professional employees' associations can take from this case? If a hypothetical non-academic observer looked at the case of academic employees in contemporary top English institutions, s/he would likely agree with Freidson's (1984) conclusion about professional organizations: there will be always some continuing presence of autonomy on top of a web of constraints representing control. The degree of autonomy is not necessarily constant, though, and English universities seem to restrict the academic profession to minimal capacities for self-control. Also, the distribution of this autonomy is not to be assumed as uniform. In fact, the most successful

action by the ‘employer/managerial side’ towards the ‘employees’ side’ is not control per se, nor managerialism, tighter accountabilities practices, higher thresholds for career progressions, more ‘administrative’ bureaucracy, or even the emphasis over the student-as-a-customer—although each of these factors is important. Ultimately, the case of academic employees shows that, if one professional organization develops internal divides whereby only some employees (the ‘successful’ ones) can undergo fruitful hybridism (e.g., developing their own careers within or aside managerial practices), that profession is less likely to develop an idea of common representation. A second driver for strife in representation is that the more each academic can negotiate and endorse a change for his/her own specific case, the less this person will be motivated to invest time and resources in collective action, especially if this action is already an arena occupied by other colleagues who are, in turn, ideologically identifiable. Third, as far as control on one’s work (the essence of *professionalism* as per definition) is secured predominantly by a zero-sum game with other colleagues, unity and collective representation can’t prosper. In other words, autonomy at an individual level managed via a chain of line management system appears to contradict Olsen’s (2016) findings about professional employees being able to face the employer. Whether this difference is based on different professions (academics, physicians, or others) or on different national contexts remains uncertain. Nevertheless, these factors all trend in the same direction—more feeble representation for the main profession of a given professional organization.

The academic system tends to perceive UCU, in the best of scenarios from UCU’s point of view, as the counterbalance to HR divisions. In fact, UCU Reps are usually not summoned by institutions to discuss issues. This reinforces the evidence that UCU finds itself in an ‘estranged’ field, with little opportunity to address this estrangement. This condition marks a clear difference with professional systems and contexts where employees can rely on HR professionals themselves for advocacy (Mamman et al., 2019). In comparison to health systems, where managers and nurses might impose on physicians (the latter being the most similar professionals to research-active academics) to share power (Kirkpatrick et al., 2011), the English university system appears institutionally a multi-facet hybrid field, with academics themselves wearing too many overlapping hats for a coalescence of interests against anyone else, who may also happen to be another academic with another collection of hats. On top of this, they might be in competition with each other for multiple reasons.

Similarly, Pernicka and Reichel (2014) also identified reasons expressed by professionals to refrain from joining their respective professional association/union. For the sake of highly-skilled employees within and beyond higher education, the lesson might be that under highly scattered hybridism, it is unlikely that a profession can express itself under a collective body representing the employees as such—either at an institutional or systemic/country level. Possibly, though admittedly not always, a more *symbiotic* stance towards management may help in gaining viable representation (Bucklew et al., 2012).

Conclusions

The interplay discussed in Table 4 allows observation of some reasons explaining the bigger picture of the unequal strife for professional representation. The relation between UCU and the academic profession appears to have an intrinsic, everlasting, pattern:

AUT can either swim with the tide or, if it chooses to oppose [the changes in the profession and in society], will know the strength of the currents it will have to negotiate (Perkin, 1969, p. 227)

After half a century, the above prophecy by Harold Perkin is substantially right. This professional association has found it harder to be recognized actively for negotiations and representation within the system.

Overall, the multiple logics applied to English research-intensive higher education seems reveal an unequal relationship that ensures an ongoing dynamic of *processing change of legitimation*, *endorsement of change*, and *negotiating advocacy*, that literature documents broadly in professional associations (Greenwood et al., 2011; Greenwood et al., 2002). This looks coherent with the ‘estranged’ type of multiple logics. This case also provides an insightful angle to look at professional arenas as a sort of competition for the hegemony in *cultural claim-making* (Spillman & Brophy, 2018). The *moral agency* these latter authors define as essential in describing the core of professionalism is, in fact, reproduced within UCU (UCU, 2013). Nevertheless, this moral agency that UCU enhances, posing itself as the defender of autonomy and self-control of the profession against managerialism, seems a further demonstration that UCU understands itself as an *alternative* to status quo, rather than an effective way to engage with current challenges. It is no surprise that this stance comes alongside with union-like posture.

Likewise, this paper sheds light on an interesting phenomenon: the harsher internal conflicts are, the more likely moral agency represented by UCU is partial (or self-selective) and not involving all academics (and what the whole academics think their profession ought to be). It is difficult to represent a whole profession if a specific professional representation body is perceived to embody only a part of that spirit—that spirit being *a fortiori* at odds with some hegemonic socio-political patterns, such as those of neoliberalism.

To recall Perkin’s quote about the strength of the currents, to swim against the tide may not be a very incisive move that is conducive to change, but occasions of win-win dynamics are possible, however irregular. Only when change is possible are such efforts advantageous (Waring, 2017).

Although the role of professional associations might be relatively small, this role should not be neglected, nor overestimated. This is relevant not only for professionals themselves, but also for the sake of institutions, the sector they form, and the final beneficiaries of their work.

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