

Between Enslavement and Empowerment. The Idea of Empowerment in the Work of a Polish Academic Teacher

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Abstract: Reflecting on the concept, meaning, and properties of empowerment prompted an analysis of selected forms and areas of academic teachers' activities. The author examines the factors that support and limit academic teacher empowerment, as well as its various dimensions. Depending on the emotional states that accompany the actions undertaken by the respondents, a sense of agency or enslavement appears. The research is situated within the interpretive paradigm, and the article is based on the findings of qualitative research conducted using unstructured interviews with academic teachers.

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The future must be created by a free,
ethical, socialized, and complete person.
[Grzegorzewska 1947:48]

The 21st-century human is viewed as an independent entity capable of deciding their own fate, taking conscious action, and achieving mental well-being. Therefore, throughout the development process, it is crucial to support self-awareness while strengthening and developing an active and creative attitude (Freire 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). Theoretical considerations and research undertaken within these areas have led to the development of the empowerment approach, which aims to enable individuals to gradually take responsibility for the consequences of their actions in both individual and social matters. As empowerment is a multidimensional construct and is frequently built on individual value systems and beliefs, interest in its concept and practice continues to grow, both in science and in practice. The term is currently used in psychology, pedagogy, social work, sociology, economics, and feminist studies. It is also present in politics, business, and in the language of international organizations dealing

with development issues and equal opportunities in various areas of life (Szarfenberg 2015). This article examines empowerment in the specific context of Polish higher education, with particular attention to academic teachers.

In pedagogy, empowerment is a process of developing critical thinking, a sense of competence and agency, and the ability to make conscious decisions in order to foster more independence and active participation in the educational process (Freire 2000; Czerepaniak-Walczak 2025). Empowerment understood in this way is aimed primarily at strengthening an individual's competencies, making them self-directed, independent, and responsible for themselves. This process is strongly anchored in the context of an individual's life. It takes into account not only their personal deficits and barriers, but also the context of the groups in which they play specific roles, the context of institutions that outline the socio-legal framework of life, and the context of the local environment that provides a broad perspective for social interactions (Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman 1995). Therefore, within education management and frequent educational reforms, the

state teacher empowerment—including that of academic teachers—and the mechanisms for achieving it warrant careful examination.

Polish legislation on higher education and science delineates the duties of an academic teacher by linking them to the employee's appointment profile: teaching-only, research-only, or combined research-and-teaching. In statutory terms, the core responsibility of teaching staff is the education of students, whereas research staff are primarily tasked with conducting academic research. For research-and-teaching staff, these responsibilities are integrated, encompassing both conducting research and educating students. One key organizational parameter that shapes academic work is the differentiated teaching workload (known as the *pensum*) specified in the Law on Higher Education and Science (Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science, Journal of Laws 2024, item 1571, Art. 127). Depending on the position held, the annual teaching load amounts to a maximum of 240 hours for research-and-teaching staff, up to 180 hours for professors within this group, and up to 360 hours for teaching staff. In addition, every academic teacher is required to undertake administrative duties for the university and to engage in continuous professional competences (Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science, Journal of Laws 2024, item 1571).

The Concept and Dimensions of Empowerment

The term *empowerment* derives from the English verb *empower*, which emerged in the seventeenth century and originally meant to authorize, enable, or confer the capacity to act. The noun *empowerment* was first recorded in the nineteenth century,

and ultimately traces its roots to the word *power*, itself derived through Old French from Vulgar Latin *potere* (“to be able”), carrying the sense of enabling someone or investing them with agency and capability. Although the term has a much longer history, its contemporary social and political significance developed in the United States during the 1960s and expanded in the 1970s alongside movements seeking to combat discrimination, reduce social inequalities, and improve access to education and healthcare (Twardowski 2012). In contemporary usage, empowerment generally refers to the ways in which individuals or groups gain greater capacity to act, influence decisions, and shape the conditions affecting their lives. In Polish, the English term is often adopted directly or rendered through a range of expressions, including *wzmocnienie/wzmacnianie* (strengthening), *upodmiotowienie* (recognition of autonomous agency), *upęłnomocnienie* (authorization/enabling), and *uprawnienie* (enfranchisement or entitlement) (Szarfenberg 2015:1).

The aim of empowering, validating, and agency-building activities is to achieve a state in which individuals and groups regain control over their own lives, circumstances, objectives, rights, space, and language. At the same time, they become able to define their needs and goals, and also have a sense of influence over key life events (Jarczyńska 2017). Empowerment is often seen as a process that awakens individuals' strength and motivation to act, directing their efforts toward issues that they consider important. This approach is corroborated by Anna Emmanuele Calves, who notes that empowerment “assumes the ability of individuals and communities to take action to ensure their well-being or the right to participate in decisions that affect them” (2009:736).

Meanwhile, Julian Rappaport (1987) posits that empowerment is a process through which individuals and groups gain control over their lives and participate in their communities on democratic principles. It is a dynamic process that manifests in everyday practices, institutional structures, and community life. From this perspective, what matters is not only the issue of individual agency, but also the extent to which the social and organizational environment creates conditions in which that agency can be enacted. Empowerment thus incorporates individual dimensions (a sense of influence and competence), collective dimensions (community, solidarity), and structural dimensions (rules, resources, hierarchies, and mechanisms of power).

For academic teachers, Rappaport's definition takes on particular significance: a university is simultaneously a space of epistemic authority, autonomy, and academic freedom, while also being an organization subject to strong mechanisms of regulation, evaluation, and oversight. In practice, this tension manifests itself in a discrepancy between the idea of the university as a community and the everyday reality dominated by efficiency pressures, task overload, bureaucratic procedures, and a strong dependence on external evaluation criteria. In such a context, the resulting erosion of agency can translate into a perceived lack of autonomy and influence over decisions, employment insecurity, and, consequently, doubts about the meaning and purpose of academic work.

These approaches show that empowerment is a multidimensional construct that includes elements such as a sense of efficacy, an individual's ability to make decisions about themselves, the belief that their actions are valuable, and the ability to meet their own needs. It also encompasses the ability to utilize available resources, an understanding of

the social environment, willingness and commitment, and the ability to speak up for themselves (Twardowski 2006). Based on these dimensions, the following types can be distinguished (Blachowska-Szmigiel 2017:203):

- societal empowerment, which involves increasing citizens' participation in democratic governance;
- the empowerment of communities and target groups, which reflects the dynamic interactions between individuals and groups that ultimately improve their place within the broader social environment;
- individual empowerment, defined as third parties (such as community organizers, trainers, pedagogues, psychologists, coaches, or teachers) facilitating and expanding the personal efficacy of individuals or groups. The essence of this support is to foster self-esteem, self-trust, initiative, mastery, and control over their lives;
- self-empowerment, understood as autonomous actions taken by individuals to increase their own power.

Empowerment acts as both a process and an outcome. As a process, it entails facilitating, enabling, and promoting the ability to function optimally and competently. In this sense, it serves as a goal in itself, allowing individuals and groups deprived of agency to overcome this state and become capable of establishing and rebuilding their status as equal, competent citizens. In this context, empowerment includes both individual and collective dimensions, as well as subjective and objective ones.

The individual dimension involves targeted activities aimed at increasing an individual's autonomy, self-confidence, and belief in their own abilities, while enriching their knowledge, competencies, and skills. It is understood as an individual's internal motivation, which encompasses four aspects: giving personal meaning to one's work (meaning), awareness of one's own abilities and skills (competence), belief in the possibility of making proactive choices (self-determination), and belief in the value of one's own work. By contrast, the collective dimension refers to social structures, barriers, and power relations that sustain inequality and injustice, thereby reducing individuals' chances of taking control of their own lives.

The subjective dimension encompasses an individual's sense of agency, while the objective dimension is characterized by a real expansion of the scope of that agency. The latter is understood as a sense of internal control, i.e., the awareness that subsequent events are directly related to a specific action of the individual participating in them (Jarczyńska 2017). When viewed as an outcome, empowerment represents the final state of acquiring the strength (power) and agency that enables individuals, groups, institutions, or communities to fight for wider systemic change (Karwacki et al. 2017).

The analysis demonstrates that the word empowerment has a positive connotation and is inherently relational. Granting, adding, or increasing strength, agency, and power for individuals who previously lacked them or faced severe restrictions inevitably reshapes established relationships and institutional dynamics (Jarczyńska 2017). It is the antithesis of powerlessness. At the core of empowerment lies the assumption that individuals possess the ability to take control of their own lives, the possibility of

self-development, taking initiatives, and transforming the social environment. Ultimately, empowerment is a process-oriented approach involving actions and outcomes aimed at strengthening an individual's personal power to increase control over their own lives, foster active participation in social life, and enable them to shape their own circumstances and those of the entire community.

Methodology of the Present Study

The study was conducted as part of an interdisciplinary research grant.¹ The research is grounded in the interpretative paradigm, the fundamental concept of which is action taken by social actors (Wyka 1993; Hałas 2006; Chomczyński 2012). This approach made it possible to capture the social reality under study from the perspective of the actors themselves. Within this paradigm, social reality is not hermetic or absolute; it is created by social actors and reflectively reproduced. Moreover, social roles and assumed statuses are constructs subject to negotiation, which makes them fluid and relative. Crucially, these mechanisms are mediated through communication (Hałas 2006; Blumer 2009). The empirical findings presented in this article emerged from qualitative analyses conducted in accordance with the procedures of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967), utilizing focused category coding (Konecki 2000, 2005).

In accordance with the adopted interpretive paradigm, empowerment was treated as a socially constructed, relational, and processual phenomenon revealed in the narratives and practices of academic

1 IDUB Interdisciplinary Research Grant entitled "Engagement and Exhaustion as (Un)Expected Outcomes of the Emotional Labour of Academic Teachers" (no. 3/IGB/2022, project code: B2311813000200.07).

teachers. Consequently, the analysis is anchored in grounded theory to reconstruct the meanings and mechanisms of strengthening and weakening agency in specific institutional conditions.

Within qualitative empirical research anchored in the interpretive paradigm, a distinction is made between the object of knowledge and the object of study. The object of knowledge in the present study is the empowerment of academic teachers, understood as a socially constructed process of meaning-making surrounding academic work from the perspective of social actors. The object of study, by contrast, comprises the professional experiences, narratives, and interpretations of academic teachers elicited through in-depth individual interviews concerning factors that either build or undermine their empowerment.

The aim of this analysis is to reconstruct and critically examine the idea of empowerment in the work of academic teachers. Given the particular context of this research, the study prioritizes a cognitive (knowledge-generating) aim consistent with the interpretive paradigm and grounded theory methodology, whereas practical aims are secondary and application-oriented. The epistemic aims include:

- identifying elements and experiences that build or strengthen the empowerment of academic teachers;
- identifying elements and experiences that destroy or weaken the empowerment of academic teachers;
- explaining academic teachers' professional experiences and their reflective engagements with institutional reality.

The operational aims are:

- providing knowledge that may serve as a basis for reflection on the working conditions of academic teachers at Polish universities;
- indicating areas of institutional action that foster either the strengthening or the weakening of academic teachers' empowerment;
- supporting institutional change and the development of organizational culture in higher education institutions by drawing on insights derived from the study.

The empirical data are derived from 17 in-depth interviews conducted with ten women and seven men working as academic teachers at eight Polish universities. The participants represent the social sciences, with varying lengths of service, but no less than 10 years. Before the interviews began, each participant provided written consent, which was subsequently digitized and archived. After the interviews, the material was initially analyzed, encrypted, and anonymized to ensure additional data protection. The anonymization process was coordinated by the project manager. To ensure strict compliance with personal data regulations and institutional data security, the data handling protocols adhered strictly to the University of Lodz guidelines; consequently, all empirical material was encrypted and anonymized immediately following data collection. The semi-structured interviews, conducted online between April and July 2025, revolved around two central inquiries: what elements build the empowerment of academic teachers, and what elements destroy it. The participants were highly receptive to detailing their everyday professional experiences. The supportive atmosphere established during

the interviews ensured participant comfort and security, thereby enhancing the depth and reflexivity of the gathered material. Significantly, several participants noted post-interview that they found the session to be a deeply cathartic experience.

Elements that Foster a Sense of Empowerment Among Academic Teachers

Academic teachers today face rapid change and educational uncertainty. New expectations and the need for professional transformation are emerging alongside shifting socio-political conditions. When analyzing the factors that contribute to a sense of empowerment among these academics, three areas can be distinguished:

1. a sense of self-fulfillment and satisfaction with their profession,
2. didactic work and cooperation with students,
3. social relations and the need for recognition.

With the development of science and technology, the requirements for teachers are increasing, their qualifications are constantly expanding, and new professional tasks are being set. Consequently, there is a need for continuous training in how knowledge is transferred, applied, and produced. In the present study, this was noted by the narrators, who stressed the importance of acting in accordance with their own interests and values, and the value of self-fulfillment and self-improvement in professional practice. One of the respondents puts it this way: "I am very grateful to be where I am, at university (...) I am passionate about the discipline itself, pedagogy; it allows me to develop my interests". Undoubtedly, the opportunity for per-

sonal and professional development is a factor that supports the empowerment of academic teachers. The narrators believe that their profession requires openness to the world and people. They analyze and interpret many professional situations to consciously introduce changes into their actions. This is accompanied by a sense of influencing others, so they try to encourage reflection and critical thinking both in themselves and in their students. In their statements, they highlight the constant pursuit of development through acquiring new knowledge and skills, developing creativity, and overcoming their own limitations. On the one hand, the ability for self-transcendence in overcoming individual barriers in professional work is very important, as it helps them keep up with a changing educational landscape. On the other hand, there is a need for self-actualisation, which manifests itself when one feels the imperative to improve one's skills, unleash creative potential and constantly strive to "become" a teacher, because "a good educator is an erudite person, someone who is interested in the world, someone who is ready to work on themselves first and foremost, because then they are able to inspire others, so it is important to me that they (students) are independent thinkers."

The dominant factor in the narrators' stories regarding empowerment was the area of didactic work and cooperation with students. The words "I like teaching; it is something that is important to me" were repeatedly mentioned in the conversations. At the same time, teaching often brings positive emotions and feelings, while successful classes and good relationships with student groups often generate a sense of satisfaction and professional fulfillment: "(...) there is also joy. I mean, I really like it when it resonates. Yes, I also experience such emotions of joy. When there is a good group. I need such

positive reinforcement.” The didactic aspect takes on particular significance when the results are visible in the form of students’ interest in the content and material: “It’s incredibly nice when you meet a student who is interested... You feel that what you say lights a fire in their eyes.” The described “fire in the eyes” of the students is a powerful expression of appreciation for the narrators, who receive a signal that their message is engaging and moving. The reinforcing mechanism is the feedback from students (interest, activity, “resonance”), which confirms the effectiveness of the teacher’s actions. This phenomenon can be described as relational dynamics. Some see the purpose of teaching as building a sense of security in students, encouraging them to share their views and opinions, which translates into the courage to express their position and motivation to continue studying. As one of the narrators points out, this safety is a necessary condition for achieving their goals and taking on new challenges:

... they are not afraid during discussions that they will be criticized or that someone will tell them that their answer is wrong and that they will feel ridiculed in front of the group. It is also valuable to me that many people write, for example, that they dared to speak up for the first time, that they did not feel such freedom in other classes, and here they know that even if we disagree, or what they say is not quite the perfect answer, there will still be space for it.

Safety and dialogue are key conditions. The teacher creates a space where students can speak up without fear of ridicule, which increases their courage and motivation. Empowerment is relational and bi-directional: the teacher empowers students (by validating their voice) and simultaneously experiences empowerment (through meaning, satisfaction, and a sense of influence).

A key dimension of empowerment is a friendly working environment, which includes good relations and satisfaction with interactions with colleagues. An important factor in this regard is an organizational culture based on mutual respect, a positive atmosphere, and a sense of community. This theme appears in one of the statements: “Throughout my entire life here at the university, I have experienced a lot of kindness. (...) If I were to generate an average of these various relationships, I would say that this average would undoubtedly be 75%.” Good relationships in the workplace guarantee positive emotions and improved well-being, while the goodwill and support of colleagues build a sense of security and satisfaction. They are a source of support, aid personal development, shape social attitudes and behaviors, and provide an essential basis for building self-esteem and self-worth. One of the narrators recalls the beginnings of their employment as follows: “I felt grateful for such a warm welcome from my older colleagues when I was hired. That’s when X and Y, the oldest members there, took me under their wing. (...) I remember that it was so nice that I felt so safe.” Among the elements related to building social relationships, the need for recognition is a very important component of the empowerment of academic teachers. This need is fulfilled when work is appreciated by superiors or students. The individual perceives their work as valued by others, earning their recognition. As one participant noted, “I also see the social impact of my work, which is expressed somewhat in building a network of such acquaintances, relationships, bonds, and a certain recognition, through kind words, through invitations to various committees, [and] through invitations to give lectures.”

In the analyzed narratives, academic teacher empowerment emerges as a relational and affective

process embedded in teaching and collaboration with students. A key mechanism is feedback (interest, “resonance”) and the creation of a safe space for dialogue, enabling students to speak up without fear – which strengthens both students and teachers. Furthermore, academic teacher empowerment is deeply rooted in relationships and organizational culture: kindness, respect, a positive atmosphere, and a sense of community. Support from colleagues – especially at the beginning of the job (“being taken under a colleague’s wing”) – fosters the need for belonging, which is crucial for well-being and the quality of motivation at work.

Factors Undermining the Empowerment of Academic Teachers

Among the factors that undermine empowerment, academic teachers identified elements that can be classified into the following areas:

1. emotions associated with performing professional duties,
2. didactic work and cooperation with students,
3. social relations,
4. operating within a specific organization.

Two areas—teaching and working with students, as well as social relations—played a dual role, functioning as both constructive and undermining influences on empowerment.

Emotions play a special role in the educational process because they influence the motivation, interest, and achievements of both teachers and students. A teacher’s emotions are central to their mental health

and well-being, influencing their ability to impart knowledge and foster cooperation with and among students, while also contributing to their personal development and well-being.

Today, the professional role of an academic teacher involves experiencing a variety of emotions, often including tension and ambivalence. One of the narrators speaks directly about the emotions accompanying their professional activity: “Now there is this fear, this uncertainty about whether I can do it, whether I can meet these expectations in this professional situation, which is important to me because I am an ambitious person.” Another aspect related to negative emotions is the uncertainty and instability resulting from unpredictable situations and changing national education law and policy, which can lead to work overload and general discouragement. This is evidenced by the following statement: “I would like—and I think that I am not being original here at all—such stability. (...) I miss what I call vision, and I miss stability.”

Academic teachers often experience stressful situations and crises related to their teaching work. Stress often accompanies teaching, regardless of experience and seniority:

The thing is, I’ve never been able to get rid of stress. Of course, there are classes that come easier to me, and there are those that are more difficult. I used to really enjoy theoretical classes, reading books, and delving into who wrote what and so on. Now, not so much, because it requires a bit more concentration.

Another narrator draws attention to a decline in motivation to work, a sense of dissatisfaction, and the risk of burnout, noting, “People are so demotivated. I generally feel less satisfaction from this work—yes,

unfortunately, I think this (work) is very conducive to burnout.”

Another factor blocking the sense of empowerment among academic teachers is students’ attitudes towards the learning process. This decline in motivation, reluctance, and feelings of helplessness stems from a lack of involvement in the teaching process, which in turn is linked to a decline in the quality of education: “Because there is no response from the other side, I also burn out, which makes me less willing to work and even increases my frustration and dissatisfaction.” The passive attitude of students during classes often causes frustration and a sense of failure:

I often feel such a profound sense of futility and emptiness after leaving these classes—that we have all wasted our time. Them, because they were tired of sitting with me, and me, pretending that I was imparting something wise and that I enjoyed it. It’s just a very, very unpleasant feeling of failure.

In today’s world, studying is no longer valued. Instead, it is often just one of many activities undertaken by students, which, in their opinion, does not require effort or initiative.

And maybe if [the university] were more prestigious, in the sense that it was in a larger city, and even getting onto our program were more difficult... maybe that student would also be more committed, because he’d care more, because he would have come a long way, and would have had to put a lot of effort into just getting into the program. But that’s not the case.

These stressful situations and moments of crisis, especially when they last for a long time and remain unresolved, can lead to a decline in commitment to

teaching, discouragement, and falling into a routine. Consequently, classes with students become a source of weariness and chronic fatigue.

Another factor that undermines the empowerment of academic teachers is the relationship between faculty members. Teachers are subject to institutionalized social norms, and the hierarchical structure inherent in universities is not conducive to building a sense of empowerment. As one narrator observed: “We are very hierarchical here, we do not treat colleagues who are in lower positions—who have lower titles or lower degrees—as our equals. We do not want to treat them that way because we are afraid that it will threaten our authority.” The hierarchy of positions at the university is intended to facilitate the organization of work, but personal favoritism overrides employees’ skills and resources, as one narrator noted: “I do not agree with this, and I will certainly not accept what is called ‘the structure’ in academia until the end of my career. (...) It’s not competence that counts, but connections.”

Conflicts and rivalry often arise between faculty members in the course of their various tasks. Misunderstandings usually lead to a decline in mutual trust and social withdrawal, as one teacher explains: “I can see that there are various tensions at the Institute, sometimes even conflicts. And I’m afraid I’ll have to take a stand. Well, you can’t be nice and polite to everyone (...), but you have to be honest with yourself, just be honest with yourself.” The lack of agreement, understanding, and unanimity at one university was clear from the following account: “The institute is very divided. It has always been divided. There have always been different camps; we are a bit dualistic, like our country. It’s terrifying!” Sometimes relationships are destroyed as a result of top-down actions and decisions: “We had to ac-

cept that there was a strong desire for us to be at the same level as international universities, but it was done in such a technocratic way that it dehumanized our relationships, which were not very good to begin with.” The same teacher later described an evident lack of relationships and bond building within the institution:

I have the impression that there are no relationships between employees at our institute. There are no relationships. It’s all very superficial, and we pass each other by. There is a lack of nice touches that would really create such openness. There has never been any of that, that is, an atmosphere that costs nothing, but at the same time builds bonds.

The undermining factors of empowerment presented here can be described as relational and cultural dysfunctions within the institution. Strong hierarchies, cronyism, the favoring of connections over competence, increasing conflicts and rivalry, and divisions into opposing camps all contribute to a decline in mutual trust and lead to sham superficial relationships.

For some time now, market mechanisms have been introduced into higher education, posing new challenges for academic teachers, including the need to activate their “managerial competence resources” (Sajdak 2015:55). As a result, the most desirable academic skills now include proficiency in preparing research project applications, the ability to secure funding, and financial accounting. The narrators commented extensively on these shifts:

I believe that the university is also a place that should create space for learning, it should provide opportunities for development, it should not be focused solely

on generating research results, but we should also use these research results to develop future generations. However, this is a mission of sorts.

The respondents note that being a teacher is often considered secondary to the role of researcher, with teaching duties sometimes regarded as unnecessarily time-consuming and an obstacle to academic work. This is because the most important factor in faculty member evaluations is always academic activity, including scholarly publications, active participation in nationally or internationally funded research and projects, citation rates, scientific academic conferences, etc.). “Job satisfaction and the sense of security that should also be felt have evaporated. (...) There is no sense of security; we can be eliminated at any moment because we may stop producing good publications.” Academic work has become a field of competition for points, driven by the necessity to meet publication quotas. These requirements cause great resentment among academic staff, who feel the pressure to publish “for points,” and this structural shift demonstrates how utilitarianism and technocracy are overtaking the traditional mission of the university. As one narrator observed:

It is a space we do not identify with, which has no meaning for us. It is like a railway station or an airport, where we are only there to achieve a specific goal. In our case, that goal is to get paid and then reach retirement age. Once we get our pension, we are happy. This is only an illusion, however, because very often people start to miss their workplace, as they have this syndrome where they don’t know what to do with themselves. But until that time, they hope that the magical moment will finally come when they will be free—freed from these shackles.

The topic of “forced” publishing aroused a lot of emotion and often came up in conversations.

I’ve written quite a bit in my life, and it started to wear me out, quite simply. Especially since I’m starting to see it more and more as something forced upon me. You have to tick off those points accumulated somewhere and so on. A few years ago, I used to feel some excitement about it. And even now, I sometimes feel happy that I’ve written something interesting, but it rarely happens, and I treat it more as a rather unpleasant duty than a joy.

Some people even describe the pressure to produce articles or publish scholarly books as oppression: “There have always been expectations to publish, but now it’s so normalized and described in all these criteria and parameters—which I can never understand anyway—that it’s exhausting. Yes, it’s exhausting, and I treat it as oppression, which I find harder to accept now.”

In the contemporary university, publishing is experienced not as a creative practice but as an externally enforced obligation subordinated to “ticking off boxes,” leading to fatigue and a decline in teacher satisfaction. The compulsion to publish can be seen as a manifestation of an audit culture (governance by metrics), which alters the meaning of academic work, limits autonomy, and creates the risk of burn-out.

Formal assessment of research and teaching performance, alongside student evaluations of teaching, further compounds this pressure. Assessment is an integral part of the academic profession, regardless of position or seniority. Every aspect of professional life is subject to assessment, which does not have

a positive or motivating effect on commitment and identification with the workplace.

Our work has always been related to evaluation, because we are evaluated by students and other colleagues, and there is career advancement in general [to think about]. We are always being assessed. Submitting a text to a journal is always an assessment. When I go to work, I constantly feel that someone is comparing me to someone else, that they are about to say that so-and-so has a text worth so many points, and you still don’t have any, or she is doing a project, and you don’t have one at all.

Assessment is associated with many negative emotions, which one of the narrators describes as follows: “I hate being assessed. I feel anxious and angry that someone is scrutinizing me. I feel like someone is trying to hurt me, because it usually involves looking for mistakes rather than looking for what has been done well.” The constant assessment process to which academic teachers are subjected creates a sense of pressure and constant accountability. This often comes with significant emotional costs, manifesting as constant anxiety and a sense of injustice.

Another aspect directly related to assessment is the evaluation of teaching, which aims to improve the quality of instruction and quality of instruction and inform the university’s personnel decisions. The results of the evaluation are one of the elements of the periodic assessment of an academic teacher and are subject to detailed analysis by those responsible for the implementation of the teaching process within their department. These evaluations are another element that has a destructive impact on the well-being and empowerment of academic teachers, as one narrator observed:

What is still a burden on teaching is the evaluation system that is currently in place, which gives you the impression that you are at the service of others, that you are performing the function of a service provider from the student's perspective, [and] that you have to be very careful about everything because you may not meet their expectations.

Building empowerment in the work of an academic teacher involves removing the fear of assessment and failure. Unfortunately, contemporary universities fail to foster such environments.

Conclusions

If we accept the Cornell University Empowerment Group's (1989) definition that empowerment is a dynamic phenomenon embedded in local communities and grounded in mutual respect, critical reflection, social support, and group participation, then our research shows that this occurs to a very limited extent among academic teachers. In light of Julian Rappaport's definition (1987), according to which empowerment is the means by which people gain control over their own lives and participate in their communities according to democratic principles, it can also be seen that a sense of enslavement dominates over a sense of empowerment in this professional group. The dominance of practices that centralize decisions, impose heavy bureaucratic burdens, and are shaped by pressure from external performance indicators decreases motivation, removes influence over decisions, prompts doubts about the meaning of work, and weakens identification with the academic community.

Empowerment presupposes the existence of a safe environment in which academic teachers can reflect on their work without fear of judgment. An environment that is conducive to development focuses on feedback and constructive criticism rather than permanent assessment and evaluation. In the context of empowerment strategies, it is important to support teachers' motivation and create opportunities for them to act, publish, and generate conditions for creative confrontation. Individuals are empowered when they can participate in social relations with a personal sense of agency. If there is no opportunity for empowerment, participation, power sharing, or joint decision-making in higher education institutions, then empowerment will not be possible.

The findings reveal the complexity of empowerment as a phenomenon that spans the individual, social, and organizational aspects of academic teachers' work. In all these areas, they are closer to enslavement than to a sense of empowerment. The respondents speak openly about being treated as objects and point to frequent abuse of power. Fostering empowerment requires a high level of professionalism on the part of management, which should provide employees with support and create conditions for the development of the competencies necessary to make decisions and implement them responsibly. It should also be guided by greater trust and a deliberate shift in hierarchical structures through the redistribution of power, control, and authority with subordinates. However, at present, transformations in higher education institutions seem unlikely, as they first require changes in underlying attitudes.

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