The Academic – *a user guide*

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"Please read the manual before use"

Introduction

An academic is someone who is paid to be knowledgeable – either being expert in all the knowledge on a particular subject or at the forefront of developing knowledge – but is usually expected to teach, write papers and do research. It is natural, therefore, to wish to consult such a person when this knowledge is relevant. However, those that do, can find this a frustrating experience. Academics are the result of a particular kind of educational system and culture, and so have their own motivations, skills, limitations and defects[1]. This is an attempt to make a guide for how to consult an academic productively.

This guide will neither be completely comprehensive nor infallibly true, since individual academics vary so much. It will, inevitably, present a somewhat stereotyped picture of an academic. However, we think the warnings and guidelines discussed are more widely useful, for example by some in business or government. However, just by publishing such a guide we also hope to raise awareness of the possible issues and provoke debate on how academics do or should interact with the rest of the world[2]. For obvious reasons, this is not written as an academic text.

About Academics

Academics are embedded within a particular tradition, one that is usually traced back to Classical Greece, but, at different times, has been developed by different cultures (e.g. the early Islamic world) and is now completely international. This selects, trains and rewards people in particular ways.

> *Firstly*, they have to engage in 'debate': the iterative and mutual critique of each other's ideas. This encourages them to be somewhat defensive in their communication in order to anticipate attacks and defend themselves.
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> *Secondly*, they tend to present their work formally, most importantly in the written word. Again, this encourages caution in what they say, since what they write will be around for a long time to come and they do not want to be revealed as fools in the future. It also means they have a lot of space within which to explain their ideas – there is little pressure to be brief.
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> *Thirdly*, these days they are pre-selected as the result of written examinations. As a result, they tend to be those who are good at such things.
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> *Finally*, within each field they relentlessly mark each other's work – what is called 'peer review' – in order to get published, to get promoted and to decide what grants will be awarded. This means that all members of a field are encouraged to adhere to the assumptions, standards and methods of that field.

This particular training and environment encourages a particular set of skills and traits that effect any interaction.

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[1] For example, academics love footnotes, allowing them to express their often pedantic nature. You can safely ignore these since they will only add caveats, references etc. and the occasional lame joke (sic).

[2] If we have time, we might write a similar user guide about policy actors for academics to read.

What Academics are *generally* good at

Their particular training and selection tend to result in people who are above average at the following skills. Thus their core skills are as follows.

- **Knowing everything available about a particular subject or issue**. Getting on top of enough knowledge in order to be able to contribute to a field takes a lot of reading. If they are not experts in a particular area then they are vulnerable to those who are, so this strongly motivates specialisation. However, an academic might be expert in a very narrow topic or a particular method.
- **Good at critiquing** (others). Academics are often much better at seeing the flaws in other people's suggestions and ideas than in making positive suggestions. They also should be as equally aware of the flaws in their own ideas, but this might be uneven – some are, some aren't.
- **Careful and cautious language/conclusions**. Due to the fact that other academics might nit-pick at anything they write or say, it is to the advantage of academics to be very cautious in any statements that they make. For example, they may add lots of caveats and conditions into their language. This makes their statements more defensible – more literally true. They should also avoid hyping the significance of their work, but the pressures to do this mean one can not rely on them not doing this at times.
- **Should know the reasons for their conclusions**. One of the standard questions asked of any academic presenting conclusions is how they got to them. Thus, academics are under pressure to not only come up with the correct conclusions but to explain *why* they think they are true. However, their justifications for their conclusions will be relative to the standards of the field they are part of – what is necessary to convince their peers. Thus, the quality of their justifications depends upon the rigour of their field's methods – in the past whole fields have been shown to be wrong, taking the involved academics with them.

They are not necessarily exceptionally intelligent (at least in normal ways) and only a very few of them are geniuses. Although they may have a lot of knowledge in their areas, in other areas they may be just winging it. A good academic will be clear and transparent about what they do and do not have expertise in.

What *some* academics *can* be good at

Being an academic can provide opportunities that others do not have. This can result in some of them developing other skills.

- **Can be a contrasting voice**. Established academics with a permanent contract have a significant level of job security. To a large extent, their career depends upon the evaluation of their peers rather than of their bosses. Further, in the UK, academics have legally enshrined freedom of expression. This allows academics to express opinions that go contrary to the current political or social norms, and some of them take advantage of this. This might be to warn about possible dangers or to critique the efficacy of popular policies. However some academics like the resulting publicity so much that they become contrarian – routinely going against the consensus of opinion because they enjoy being a rebel.
- **Can be good communicators**. Most academics have to teach students – introducing them to complex ideas and issues. Some become good at doing this, finding ways of effectively communicating knowledge without over-simplifying it. Such academics can be very effective communicators playing an important role in getting knowledge over to the public. However, such people are the exception, since many of the academic pressures (described in the previous section) do not favour clear and simple messaging.
- **Can bridge between fields**. Some academics gain expertise in more than one speciality, enabling to work in more than one field. Such academics might have a more rounded and wider knowledge than single-field specialists and are generally more used to

communicating across fields. However, these are relatively rare as the system of peer-review means that doing so makes it harder to get published and get grants. Some academic fields are more encouraging of such bridging than others.

Bugs and limitations in common with the rest of humanity

Being human, academics share many of the biases of the rest of humanity.

- **Lack of motivation**. You may want an academic to engage with your problem, and they may even be under an obligation (ethical, social or institutional) to do so, but that does not mean they are motivated to do so. Academia selects for those that are interested in the issues within their field, which are not necessarily connected to the issues others are concerned with.
- **Having a wish to please**. Like all humans, academics generally want to please those they interact with and identify with. This can result in an unconscious bias to provide the conclusions that others want. Whilst academics are more immune to this than many others (their job security does not depend on it) they are still susceptible. Academics can become too close to those who want their help and be less critical of them as a result.
- **Biased by their own assumptions**. Even though academics are encouraged to question assumptions, it is impossible to avoid all assumptions or question them all. Some of these assumptions might not even be articulated and thus effectively be invisible. The structure of academic life means that these tend to get spotted more often, as their academic competitors will tend to point these out, but it is impossible to avoid all assumptions.
- **They might not be able to describe how they do stuff**. People who have become experts in anything will automate a lot of what they do – it becomes habitual and done without conscious thinking. Academics are a prime example of this and, after a while, might be unable to clearly explain how they do what they do.

Bugs and limitations more particular to academics

In addition to the issues described in the last section, academics are more prone to the following issues than others. These are often the flip side of what they are good at.

- **Specialised language**. Academics spend their working life communicating with students and colleagues within their field. So, it is not surprising that they adapt their language for this purpose. As well as using specialist terms they will be used to an academic style of communication that does not make it easy for others to understand.
- **Narrow domain of expertise**. Everybody specialises in what they know to some extent, but academics can do this to an extent that is impractical to most others. They may know next to nothing even about topics that are close to their speciality.
- **Sometimes lacking 'common sense'**. Their specialism may mean they are unused to applying their knowledge in a broader context and some may even be ignorant of knowledge shared by most people in a society. This can result in them coming to conclusions that seem bizarre to others.
- **Assuming knowledge in an audience**. Since they largely work within their field, they are used to assuming a body of shared knowledge. This habitual assumption might be hard to break when interacting with those outside the field.
- **Adding lots of caveats and complications**. Due to being constantly critiqued, academics are more aware of the difficulties and limitations of any ideas or proposals. As a result, they tend to want to add in lots of caveats and complications in their language that can be hard decipher.
- **More knowing what is wrong rather than having positive suggestions**. Their skill at critique and awareness of difficulties/complications may mean they are reluctant to come to any definite or positive conclusions.

- **Concerned primarily with issues of their field**. The issues of a field may be very different from those shared by the wider society, to the point of seeming utterly irrelevant and obscure to those outside. It may be difficult to motivate an academic to disengage with field-specific issues and engage with those of others.
- **Social bias**. Each field tends to have its own set of core assumptions and methods which define it. The social and career pressures within a field mean that its members are not encouraged to question these. If they do it just means they are not a member of that field. Thus developing academic knowledge is a very social process, with new fields and sub-fields being invented and developed all the time, but do not expect a cutting critique of the core from a field member or for them to use methods from another field.
- **Ego**. Academics have to endure almost continual critique from their peers – every time they publish, go for a promotion or apply for a grant. Since this critique is often done anonymously it can be quite harsh and dispiriting. Some of those with thin skins often do not survive the process. As a result, those who survive this and continue in academia tend to be either either socially insensitive (they do not care what others think) and/or have huge self-confidence. Academics put a huge effort into developing their ideas and conclusions, so they tend to think they are right. As a result of this they can be over-confident in their conclusions and ideas.
- **Lack of confidence**. Other academics secretly suffer from 'imposter syndrome' – continually fearing they will be exposed as frauds or incompetent – they have just learnt to hide this. Such academics might be fearful of giving advice to others and may need encouragement to do so.
- **Take a long time**. Feedback in academia is slow. One often only knows if one is right or doing well many years after publication. There are many examples of individual's work only being recognised after their death. They are used to long-term projects and so may not be able or willing to respond to short-term deadlines.
- **Institutional difficulties in engaging**. Universities and other knowledge institutions can be inflexible, having their own goals and procedures. This can make it hard for an individual academic to engage with those outside, even when they want to.
- **Might have very complex reasons for their conclusions**. Not all knowledge or justifications can be explained in simple ways and these are experts who have devoted a considerable portion of their life to understanding a narrow field of phenomena. Thus, is it unreasonable to expect them to be able to explain *all* the reasons for their conclusions in terms that are easily understandable – many of their reasons may be only judgable by their peers.

Some suggestions for interacting with academics productively

Many academics are pleased to be asked to provide advice that is within their expertise, however many can find interaction with academics frustrating. Some suggestions as to how to make such an interaction more helpful are listed below.

- **Ensure the academic has the time**. As with many others, modern academics are often under pressure to fit many different activities within their working time. For this reason, some may simply not have the time to devote to helping another if it is not within their remit or within a grant-funded research project. There may be many who intend to help but are simply overwhelmed by their work to follow through. Thus, do ask about their commitments and what they can reasonably have time to do (bearing in mind they may be overly optimistic in their assessment due to their wish to help).
- **Find the right academic**. Just because an academic is an expert in what you need to consult on, is not enough to make interaction with them productive. They also need to be motivated and able to communicate effectively with you. Try interacting with them once or twice to judge whether these fundamental factors are there.

- **Motivate your academic**. To get the best from an academic try to ensure they get some of what they want out of the interaction, beyond merely being socially useful. Probe them for what they would like to get out of the interaction. They might want to get some more general understanding or formulation than what is apparent in the case you are interested in, some may want to be able to quote details in their work. They may need to prove 'impact' in the government's research assessment exercise, in which case provide the documentation they need to prove this. They may be doing this solely from a wish to be useful to society, in which case ensure they are officially thanked.
- **Use intermediaries**. If possible, try to find a person who can bridge between those in the academic field and your concerns. This may be: a person who did a PhD in the field but then did not become an academic, a science journalist who has followed the field, or an analyst who knows techniques similar to that of the academic. Such people are incredibly useful in spotting misunderstandings and getting the most from the interaction.
- **Present them something for critique**. Academics are often strongest at critique, so use them in critiquing ideas and proposals in order to be warned about their weaknesses, rather than asking them for suggestions as to what to do or what is true. Do not ignore their warnings of difficulties and limitations of the knowledge base, these might well be important.
- **Be careful about supressing their caveats**. As explained above academics will want to add caveats and complications to any assessment or suggestion they make, and the temptation here is to focus only on the main conclusions and ignore or supress these. If you do, they might respond negatively – not trusting you in the future – or defensively refuse to conclude anything useful at all. Come to an agreement that these will not be eliminated but retained in official documents somewhere[3]. It also helps to explicitly distinguish between their advice and any decisions, conclusions or actions you take on the basis of their advice.
- **Talk about concrete cases**. Understanding the abstractions that the academic works can be hard and this is a source of many confusions. The meanings and implications of abstract terms might be very different from the common understanding of these words, even if they sound the same. Keeping the discussion to a specific, documented case can increase understanding by providing a common and concrete set of reference points. If the discussion starts to become too abstract, try to bring it back to earth, e.g. asking "*so what difference would that issue have in this case?*"
- **Better face-face than written**. The writing style of many academics is often not easy to understand. Furthermore, a written response allows the academic to include many of the complications they are engaged with. It can be much more productive to have a face-face[4] dialogue which allows one to ask questions and check your understanding of what they are saying. Such face-face meetings can be in addition to a written response.
- **Interact regularly over a longer time-period**. You will not get the best out of an academic from a single meeting. It is more productive to develop a longer-term relationship with them, establishing a mutual understanding over a series of meetings.
- **Can be better in diverse groups**. Since academics are more aware of the shortcomings of other people's ideas and proposals than their own, it is useful to get them to discuss and come up with conclusions as a group. If the group are entirely within a single field then, not only are they likely to be direct competitors of each other, but will have a narrower focus and might be blind to the limitations and assumptions of their field. If the issue has serious consequences, try to get a diverse group of academics involved but beware that it can take a while for that diverse group to effectively communicate with each other.

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[3] For example in footnotes ;-)

[4] These days, face-face includes zoom meetings of course, but it is harder to have in-depth discussions to develop empathy using such tools. They can be very useful for subsequent consultations after one has reached a common understanding.

- **Use your own knowledge and common-sense.** However knowledgeable they are, one should not ignore one's own common-sense and domain knowledge – even if this is not as formally developed as theirs. An academic should be able to deal with questions, doubts and critiques from you in a productive way – remember they are used to far more stringent questioning from their colleagues! Furthermore, your non-formal domain experience might well include implicit knowledge that they do not have (due to their more formal and narrow scope), even if you can not explicitly defend it.

Acknowledgements

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References

Academics love having lots of references. It shows that they know the literature in their field, but can also be helpful in understanding where their assumptions, knowledge and methods come from. If we have *lots* of spare time we might write an academic version of this guide, with lots of footnotes, giving concrete examples and providing our references.