“Commodified, Virtualised, Globalised and Postmodernised: the professoriate stands at the crossroads of an uncertain future”, began an assessment of the profession some five years ago (Welch, 1997). What has changed in the interim, to vary this assessment? The onset of the twenty first century sees the faultlines of an uncertain future becoming increasingly evident among academics: the profession faces a number of substantial challenges, for which it is not entirely well prepared.

Not merely is the pace at which knowledge changes in higher education accelerating, accompanied by a bewildering increase in the amount of literature which the professoriate need to assimilate in order to keep abreast of their field, but the very idea of certainty in relation to knowledge is itself under increasing attack, particularly from those who relativise knowledge.

Not merely is there a demonstrated transition in many systems from elite to mass higher education, and a heightened expectation that curricula and pedagogy in higher education should be adapted to suit a more socially comprehensive cohort, but this is occurring against a backdrop of a substantial decline in funding support from governments for higher education, a trend that has led in many universities to substantial retrenchments, significant privatisation, a precipitous decline in academic salary relativities, and heightened perceptions of uncertainty among academics.

The current chapter charts several of these changes in the diverse and shifting world of the academic, providing fascinating insights into how this international profession is facing up to challenges, financial, political, administrative, and geographical, in various parts of the world.

1. THE CORROSION OF THE CANON

As indicated, perhaps one of the more significant changes in the world of academe is the challenge to knowledge itself: “There are no rules by which intellectuals can know what to say or do; nor for the true secular intellectual are there any gods to be worshipped and looked to for unwavering guidance.” With hindsight, one can discern in the 1960s a more certain and ebullient world in which, although knowledge was said to be changing quite swiftly, there was a greater degree of confidence about its shape and direction. In part, this was sustained by two factors: the legacy of a rich intellectual tradition stretching back to before the Enlightenment which, , laid great stress upon the potency of science and technology to solve problems both in the social and natural sciences. And secondly, a long and stable period of economic growth in many parts of the world after the end of World War Two. These two pillars sustained a confident world of education, which, as in

Anthony Welch (ed.), The Professoriate: Profile of a Profession, 1—19.
other social sciences, either brashly asserted technocratic modes by which “developing countries” could modernise themselves most efficiently, for example, or engaged in positivist debates as to which mode of natural scientific methodology provided the best technology for research. Increasingly stringent critiques of the technocratic ideology underlying both of these positivistic trends gradually led to a more complex understanding of methodological questions, notwithstanding elderly figures still clinging to the wreckage of this earlier faith in the power of technical formulae of one sort or another to solve problems in education, and the social sciences.

More recently, significant attacks on traditional forms of knowledge have been mounted from two overlapping quarters. The first emerged via postmodernism’s challenge to the presumed foundationalism of knowledge. In particular, postmodern critiques have entailed an increasing questioning of the often taken-for-granted nature of master narratives and grand theories which purport to explain the dynamics of society (Marxism, Liberalism and the like), and a stinging attack upon the claims of science and technology to form a basis for reason, or social reform. Rejecting all such grand theories as forms of “totalising reason”, postmodern theorists have pushed professors in many disciplines to re-examine the often unchallenged basis of their work, and to question the role of theory in explanation of phenomena.

While Lyotard’s analysis of totalising reason remains a powerful critique of the claims of modernism, including its emphasis on the performativity underlying the sciences, it is perhaps less novel than has often been claimed, has also been critiqued for its Kantianism, and, at least among many of the camp-followers of postmodernity, for its disabling relativism commodification, its textualisation of difference and a mode of blasé detachment which masks a substantial political conservatism.

Once again, however, the self-understanding of scholars in education has not been immune from this debate. Within the field of comparative education, for example, the claims and critiques of this troubled and troubling term postmodernism have been taken up in recent years by figures such as Rust, Paulston, Coulby, Coulby and Jones, and Cowen.

Although there is incomplete consensus among such authors as to the meaning of postmodernity, Coulby and Jones’ exploration of the possibilities of postmodernism for understanding European education systems is perhaps one of the more systematic efforts at grounding the theory. As such, it is interestingly cautious, making more modest claims than most. The authors reject the idea that postmodernism reflects any decisive chronological or epistemological break, indeed rejecting any core set of ideas associated with postmodernism. In a sense, this might be expected from representatives of a broad church, whose only unity consists of the rejection of any forms of programmatic reasoning; nonetheless, it arguably leaves readers less than clear as to which qualities associated with postmodernity are useful for understanding the simultaneously fissiparous, xenophobic and nationalistic moments in European education. Or, for that matter, education anywhere else. Is it the idea of “pastiche”, the association with post-Fordism, or its pluralism/relativism? The increasing sway that postmodernity holds within the academy is not necessarily contributing to this need for additional clarification. In a