

Review of

Academic Citizenship, Identity, Knowledge, and Vulnerability

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Academic Citizenship, Identity, Knowledge, and Vulnerability by Nuraan Davids is a new book in the “Debating Higher Education Through Philosophical Perspectives” series launched by Springer. The book is a timely response to the multiplicity of social concerns and imbalances prevalent in higher education globally. Davids provides a nuanced lens through the critical philosophy of race, particularly moving beyond the social construction of racial identity, to deconstruct the ideology surrounding conversations about what makes an individual who they are, worthy of their position, and the overall effects of racist practices in society. In this case, Davids focuses on the academic society and how identity is connected to the vulnerability of knowledge construction. The majority of topics covered by Davids invite readers to consider how academics’ social worlds are interconnected and affected not only by identity but also by our relationships with others. Through this book, the author leads readers to think of philosophy of race not in the abstract but in relation to everyday life. Within philosophy of education, analysis of debates on human practices and social order in current higher education through normative philosophy warrants further attention due to changing policies and practices. This literature provides an avenue for expanding this discussion, which is needed to address the marginalization of minoritized groups in Western universities.

Davids takes a qualitative approach to expand upon her philosophical analysis, reflecting a growing interdisciplinary trend in the research in philosophy of education (Schouten et al., 2014). By interviewing eight academics across different regions, Davids aims to interrogate the assumption that academic citizenship is a uniform and inclusive concept. She seeks to understand who academics are and how they embody or fail to embody their academic citizenship, also highlighting and analyzing unequal power dynamics in academic spaces.

The book includes 12 chapters divided into three sections. The first section, “Identity, Citizenship, and Vulnerability,” elaborates on Davids’ conceptualization of academic citizenship and interrogates whether institutions provide adequate space for academics to fully embody institutional membership. This section consists of five chapters. Chapters 1–4 explore various ideas related to citizenship, identity, and vulnerability, while Chapter 5 focuses more explicitly on vulnerability, negotiation, diversity, and dialogue. A key takeaway from this chapter is its critique of the monolithic approach to diversity in universities and its emphasis on recognizing academics’ individual identities. The second part of the book builds on this conceptual foundation by addressing the “how” and “why” of academic citizenship. Titled “Academic Citizenship, Knowledge, and Curiosity,” this section includes discussions of academics as embodiments of knowledge (Chapter 6), academic citizenship as curiosity (Chapter 7), and the vulnerability involved in unlearning (Chapter 8). Together, these chapters underscore the importance of individual identity in shaping how academics relate to society through their academic roles.

The third and final section, “Identity and Citizenship as Transformation,” covers Chapters 9–12 and focuses on methodology, analysis, and reflection. Davids identifies five key themes from conducted interviews with faculties across various institutions which are: (1) participants’ understandings of academic citizenship; (2)

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dominant forms of knowledge, institutional norms, and cultures; (3) diversity and transformation; (4) identity and vulnerability; and (5) reimagining inclusive academic citizenship. These themes align with earlier discussions in the book and illustrate the consequences of neglecting academic identity in the enactment of academic citizenship. By incorporating lived experiences and personal narratives into debates on higher education, *Academic Citizenship, Identity, Knowledge, and Vulnerability* fulfills its aim of deconstructing assumptions surrounding a homogenous conception of academic citizenship. Davids's sequential presentation centers on belonging and recognition in higher education, focusing on identity rather than professional role. This approach interrogates the power dynamics that shape academic participation and is particularly useful for moving beyond performative inclusion, especially at institutions that have historically been Eurocentric in their teaching and administration.

To begin grounding arguments in the book, Davids draws an analogy between academic citizenship and citizenship within a nation-state, noting the transferability between the two; however, while nation-states also establish rules and criteria for belonging, they do not regulate how individuals embody citizenship (pp. 25–26). While this analogy is compelling, it remains incomplete when applied to professional or academic contexts. For instance, in a nation-state, the expectations attached to citizenship are often mediated through broader social, political, and economic norms rather than through direct measurement of productivity as they would be in a work environment. Productivity, or the lack thereof, does not typically revoke one's formal citizenship in a nation-state, because citizens could exist within national membership with varying levels of participation. Professional citizenship, however, takes different forms and roles depending on the position and responsibilities assigned to the individual, such as senior or junior faculty, and university standards based on these roles. Individuals must meet a minimum level of productivity to remain citizens of the institution. While cultural factors such as race or gender may also shape how citizenship is experienced within a nation-state, the consequences of failing to meet institutional expectations tend to operate more directly within academic environments. Considering this distinction, the author's analogy and the transferability of what it means to be a citizen in a nation-state and within the university remain debatable. Nevertheless, Davids' acknowledgment of institutional productivity expectations alongside identity and vulnerability remains noteworthy, as these elements are central to the embodiment of academic knowledge and service.

In subsequent chapters, Davids offers a compelling critique of how higher education institutions often neglect academics' social identities while simultaneously requiring them to represent the institution. She argues that for some academics, isolation becomes the cost of belonging, while others are assimilated into dominant discourses as a condition of acceptance (p. 30). Such dynamics risk exclusion and the silencing of alternative perspectives. Davids defines identity as a sense of self shaped by values and commitments that guide one's worldview and sense of belonging (p. 32). From this perspective, genuine citizenship extends beyond formal rules to include shared responsibility and recognition within a community. Conformity, when demanded as a prerequisite for academic citizenship, can therefore displace the individual self. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak (1990), Davids further explores vulnerability as a critical dimension of academic citizenship. Vulnerability involves embracing one's truth while remaining open to transformation through engagement with others. The ways in which individuals negotiate vulnerability, however, are not linear and may vary across social contexts. Vulnerability encompasses openness to harm, exclusion, and self-reflection, while also enabling resilience and resistance to oppressive structures (p. 59).

Davids further argues that academics are not only producers of knowledge but also embodiments of knowledge, whose identities influence how their work is valued. Although professional knowledge can sometimes be abstracted from personal identity, perceptions of academics often shape the credibility of their work (p. 80). She extends this position by framing curiosity about others as a necessary component of academic citizenship: This is an argument for citizenship that recognizes its historical distortions and takes seriously the necessity to learn and to know about others (p. 95). By deemphasizing policy-centered approaches, Davids highlights the value of interpersonal relationships among academics across diverse identities. Through curiosity and the unlearning of assumptions, academics can foster care, recognition, and more equitable engagement.

To support these claims empirically, Davids adopts a qualitative approach, presenting narratives from eight faculty members across institutions in South Africa, the United States, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. Participants held permanent academic positions and represented diverse identities across geopolitical contexts. This approach allows Davids to showcase shared sentiments about academic citizenship across borders.

Significantly, many participants viewed academic citizenship as contingent upon compliance with institutional rules and service expectations rather than a sense of belonging. Some faculty described losing aspects of themselves through conformity to dominant institutional norms. For these participants, academic citizenship functioned more as an obligation than as recognition or inclusion.

While the integration of philosophy and empirical research is a notable strength of the book, it also prompts reflection on the challenges of merging these two modes of inquiry. As Schouten et al. (2014) argue, philosophers seeking to make judgments about social issues and policies must account for the full scope of social processes; otherwise, philosophical contributions to decision-making risks remaining partial and inconsequential. Although Davids effectively theorizes academic citizenship through the philosophy of race, the empirical section could offer greater contextual clarity about how these theories apply in practice. Given Davids' frequent references to South African institutional practices, readers may infer that the findings are primarily situated within that context. The inclusion of participants from multiple countries, however, raises questions about contextual alignment and transferability. Without sufficient differentiation between institutional and national contexts, Davids' reflections and recommendations for inclusion risk being underexplained and limited in transferability. This limitation underscores the importance of context in qualitative research. As Cartwright and Hardy (2012) argue, philosophy's action-guiding function depends on careful interpretation of evidence within the context in which it is applied. Similarly, Carminati (2018) emphasizes that qualitative research requires attention to context to support interpretivist meaning-making if transferability is intended; Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative investigations should be explicitly stated and methodologically supported.

Within philosophy of education, Davids engages with ongoing debates about epistemic injustice and the dominance of Western orientations in the field, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of higher education institutions. Jackson and Kwak (2025) relatedly highlight the dominance of Western intellectual traditions in philosophy of education, which often compel non-Western scholars and epistemologies to adopt Western perspectives or risk erasure. The critical philosophy of race critiques Eurocentrism by examining how racial hierarchies structure knowledge and shape educational systems. In this context, Davids interrogates educational traditions that overlook the significance of standpoint epistemology, for instance, the "situated knowledge thesis" (Toole, 2021, p. 340), as inferred in chapter six. Davids' examination of how the intersection of identity, vulnerability, and knowledge production informs academic citizenship exemplifies Toole's (2021) standpoint epistemology, which re-evaluates the epistemic significance of social identity, recognizing that knowledge about lived experience is often most effectively articulated by those who directly experience it. In educational spaces, power dynamics invariably influence who is recognized as a legitimate contributor to knowledge and how their contributions are received. In this way, the text positions academic citizenship as a critical site for examining how universities construct knowledge communities and determine whose voices are valued. Davids, therefore, emphasizes the ethical role of higher education in fostering inclusive intellectual spaces and encourages institutions to critically examine how their practices may reproduce or challenge racial and social marginalization within academic life.

Overall, Davids' work provides a valuable resource for the debates in higher education, raising critical questions about inclusion and belonging within universities. The focus on implications of personal identity, knowledge construction, and academic vulnerability extended the discourse around addressing the marginalization of others in higher education. I look forward to further philosophical exploration in this field and within a context for practical application.

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