



# Professional Practices: Commitment and Capability in a Changing Environment

*Tony Becher*

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There is recurrent public concern with enhancing the quality of professional performance. What is the contemporary understanding of professionalism? Are the needs of professionals in various fields being met in today's world, as what is commonly called "continuing professional development" has become of a sizable industry? Many books treat the professions as a homogeneous group and view them from an external standpoint. In *Professional Practices* Tony Becher investigates the differences as well as the similarities between and within professional groupings, and presents the perspectives of insiders. One particular theme concerns the main patterns of change in professional careers and the specific problems faced by women professionals in a largely male-dominated environment.

Brilliantly written, the book focuses on six professions—medicine, pharmacy, law, accountancy, architecture, and

structural engineering. The material is based on 190 interviews with a variety of members of the six professions. Becher's book offers original and sensitive insight into the working lives of practitioners and an understanding of the ideas and values they embrace. He argues that their high sense of commitment stems from a concern to enhance their individual reputations and to maintain their collective professional status. Becher highlights the variety of activities in which these professionals are engaged and the reasons for their responses to social and political pressures from outside their fields. Above all, he seeks to demystify professionalism and to show that professional people share with others a wide range of universal human feelings and concerns. A postscript raises the issue of why universities are little involved with continuing education in the professions.

Practicing professionals will benefit from this insight into how people in their own and other professions cope with similar problems. Becher's volume will be particularly appealing to educationists, policymakers, and social scientists interested in the subject of professionalism, those involved in the provision of initial and mid-career change for the professions, and those with a lay interest in the topic.

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