

EDITORIAL

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From identity to identities: a story of fragmentation

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Writing, reflection and investigation in the area of academic identities have become mainstream in higher education research over the last 20 years, largely in response to the rapidly changing conditions of academic work. Scholarship focused on academic identities has close connections with other established topics in the higher education research field including teaching, research, leadership and management, gender and equality, as well as professional and educational development. Timed to accompany the fifth international Academic Identities Conference being held in Sydney in June this year, our new virtual issue of *HERD* reprints an editorial choice of thematic articles published in the journal between 1983 and 2014.

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The articles selected for this issue (and many mentioned here that were not selected) illustrate the way that writing about academic identities has mirrored the changes affecting higher education since the founding of *HERD* in the early 1980s. These changes include emergent interest in research and scholarly writing as the pressures for research productivity have grown (see Boice, 1987; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006) along with developing attempts to assess its 'quality' (Wood, 1989); the way the ending of the binary divide in the early 1990s in both Australia and the UK led academics in so-called new universities to re-evaluate their identities (see Mahony, 1995); the growing impact of market forces on academic careers (see Dunkin, 1992) and the strains this has placed on maintaining so-called traditional goals and loyalties (Blunden, 1996), together with a deepening consciousness about gender and the need for equality in academic careers (Aiston, 2014; Johnsrud & Wunsch, 1994).

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By the early twenty-first century, the nature of academic identity in the so-called corporate university was being viewed as fragmented (see McWilliam, Green, Hunt, Bridgstock, & Young, 2000), symbolised by increasing divisions between teaching and research functions (Robertson & Bond, 2001). The fragmentation has led to the growth of para-academic specialists in different areas of academic work, such as postdoctoral researchers (Åkerlind, 2005). Coping with the changing composition of the student body and the challenges of transnational higher education has added a further layer of complexity (Smith, 2009).

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In recent years, a number of articles have indicated a collective anxiety about the deteriorating conditions of the accelerated academy. These have variously highlighted the occurrence of role overload (Winter & Sarros, 2002), academic stress attributed to perceptions of job insecurity (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005), as well as the way in which mental health issues are now more widely recognised to impact on academic staff (Ditton, 2009). Evidence seems to indicate that the disconnections between teaching and research are worse than ever before (Visser-Wijnveen, Van Driel, Van der Rijst, Verloop, & Visser, 2010). High levels of research productivity are now a given for early career academics, leading to articles exploring strategies to make them more productive via collaborative publication (Tynan & Garbett, 2008).

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One of the tensions at the heart of work on academic identities is the extent to which it should be focused on a largely descriptive empirical account of the (changing) nature of 'academic work' or take the form of a socio-political critique of working conditions based on more self-consciously theoretically informed perspectives – such as a broadly liberal tradition of the

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university (e.g., Henkel, 2007) or one drawn from a Marxist analysis of academic ‘labour’ (Neary & Winn, 2016). Those **who** write about academic identities, particularly in work that laments the declining conditions of ‘the academy’, are sometimes guilty of golden ageism and a tendency to use phrases such as ‘neo-liberalism’ as a pejorative catch-all. Perhaps this is partly because those **who** research academic identities tend to care deeply about higher education as a moral project and often hold strong ideological commitments about the underlying purposes of higher education. However, from a methodological perspective, the researcher’s positionality and inevitable insiderism could be regarded as a weakness if no attempt is made to acknowledge that standpoint and its assumptions or to ‘control’ for its effects on the analysis of data. At the same time, a passion about what it means to be an academic is what prompts many to write about academic identities in the first place.

Questions of methodological rigour are debated in all academic fields. These questions are especially relevant in a relatively immature field such as higher education research and in evaluating work on academic identities as a comparatively new line of enquiry. Whilst some articles derive from explicit theoretical frameworks (e.g., the use of communities of practice in Viskovic, 2006), others either rely on implicit connections or are atheoretical. This observation mirrors Tight’s (2004) analysis of research into higher education as a wider field in which he found that only around a quarter of articles about ‘academic work’ contained any explicit theoretical engagement. Yet, writing about academic identities is one of the areas of higher education research that ought to be of interest and accessible to all of those who work in universities: making the scholarship overly theoretical might make it less relevant to others who care.

For reasons of space, it has not been possible to reproduce all the articles published in *HERD* on academic identities. Our virtual issue represents a small but variegated selection intended to provide insight into the depth and breadth – and longevity – of the available scholarship in *HERD* and elsewhere. The growth of publications and researchers interested in academic ‘identities’ is in itself a barometer of both the increasing complexity of life in universities and the loss of a more secure sense of purpose and direction associated with an essentially singular sense of ‘identity’, formerly based on the teaching role. Until the early 1980s, articles about academic life published in international higher education journals, such as *Studies in Higher Education*, mostly referred to ‘university teachers’ rather than ‘academics’. As the demands of the role have grown, this identity has splintered into a series of identities. However, despite the changing language, the fundamental philosophical questions about what it means to *be* an academic remain largely unaltered for anyone with an interest in researching academic identities.

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