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Johnston, Alan ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4796-466X, Cock, Steven ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9355-8358, Walsh, Susan ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2564-0608 and Healy, Stuart (2023) From there to here: Reflections on alternative journeys to a career in Academia. International Journal of HRD: Practice, Policy and Research, 7 (2). pp. 19-37.

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International Journal of HRD, Practice Policy & Research, 7(2), (2023): 19-37
http:dx.doi.org/10.2478/ijhrd-2023-0003

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From There to Here: Reflections on Alternative Journeys to a Career in Academia

Alan Johnston
(Corresponding author: a.johnston@yorksj.ac.uk)

Steven Cock
Susan Walsh
Stuart Healy
York St. John University

Abstract

This paper considers the career paths of four academics at different stages in their career, examining key aspects in the trajectory of their journey to where they are now. The paper considers a range of key issues, pitfalls and barriers, and challenges they have faced in order to provide an insight into the differing journeys that academics may take. The research uses a combined auto-ethnographic and reflective approach to gather and interpret the experiences of the four individuals, in essence developing a reflective account on their personal journeys. The four academics were specifically chosen based on their different career paths, providing important opportunities to develop more in-depth reflective accounts of their stories. While they have all taken different trajectories, findings suggest significant overlap exists around issues such as imposter syndrome, psychological contract and identity. These issues, it would appear, have an interrelated impact upon the individual and, as such, cannot be separated effectively. The paper contributes to understandings of how academic careers progress, and may provide invaluable guidance to new entrants, or those considering entry into the world of academia.

Keywords: Career; Imposter Syndrome; Academic Identity; Psychological Contract

The concept of career has been under debate for the past 50 years. Several authors have tried to use differing labels to explain it (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Haigmaier & Abele, 2012; Hall, 2002). Career is, however, a dynamic process which is fluid and a result of the context in which it is considered. Unlike many terms, it cannot be narrowly classified, as it remains a construct and reflection of the time it is considered. This paper reflects upon the career journeys of four academics, all of whom have had differing journeys to where they are now. Of the four, one followed what may be considered a more traditional academic route, while the other three followed different paths, with some overlap, that may be considered non-traditional. While each journey is different, key points of self-reflection demonstrate that academics can often share similar experiences in their career journeys, providing the opportunity to identify and address those issues that are often central to all of us. There does, however, remain a difficult dichotomy to explore, as to what types of issues may enable or constrain opportunity of access into the academic world and how such issues may potentially be traversed to achieve successful careers within the higher education sector.

Literature review

Understanding the Concept of 'Careers'

The concept of career is a complex interweaving process that can be categorized in a variety of ways. Career may be considered as the notion of being

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in a particular profession, or perhaps as employment in a sequence of jobs or roles, whilst others likewise view the notion of career as involving opportunities for progression or advancement (Hall, 2002). Hall (2002, p. 23) identifies the idea of the Protean Career, which is founded on “self-direction in pursuit of psychological success in one’s own work”. Briscoe and Hall (2006) argue that two key features of a protean career are being values-driven – noting the importance that an individual places on values as a measurement tool for success – and an individual being self-directed in their personal and career management choices.

Several other authors have also tried to distinguish how careers are perceived and conceptualized. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) identified the notion of the boundaryless career, which they portrayed as transgressing traditional employment assumptions, whereby individuals identify their career through involvement in a particular role, but not necessarily with a particular employer. They identified roles such as joiners and electricians, although this may arguably also be true for academics, who perhaps identify with their role first and employer second. More recently, the concept of a career as a calling has also been considered (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). In this manifestation, Hagmaier and Abele (2012) consider five aspects as critical features: (a) identification, that is, how individuals identify with the role; (b) person-environment fit, or how individuals fit within the organization and the environment in which it operates; (c) sense and meaning, noting how individuals acknowledge the importance of their job role and what they do; (d) values-driven behaviour, examining what an individual stands for and what is important to them; and (e) transcendent guiding force, or what drives an individual internally.

Career changes are no longer uncommon, with many people choosing to change role, career, and even industries on more than one occasion during their lifetime (Future Learn, 2022). Beigi (2023) argues that career journeys are therefore unique, messy, unpredictable, and adjustable, noting that there is no “one size fits all” approach to careers, career development, or career management. The notion of career shock offers an understanding of events that can contribute to changes in direction and the pursuit of alternative careers (Akkermans et al., 2018). Whilst the cause and subsequent impact of a career shock is individualized, such processes often result in deliberate thought being given to the current position and standpoint of one’s career at a particular point in time (Akkermans et al., 2018).

Rodrigues et al. (2013) considered the balance between career anchors – as advocated by Schein (2010) – and career orientation as important aspects that inform career decisions. However, Rodrigues et al. (2013) recognize more particularly the overlap between the two. Understanding career choices is fundamental to the academic world, as many would see teaching as a vocation, but perhaps research less so. Johnston (2016) identifies the desire for expertise and the search for meaning as two of the most common key drivers for individual academics, whilst suggesting that a desire for material reward or power may have lower levels of significance. This does, however, raise the question as to what other types of issues or factors may drive an academic, more particularly, to pursue a career in academia.

Towards a Conceptualization of Academic Careers

Hall (2002) described the concept of the academic career as a range of work experiences across a period of time. Mantai and Marrone (2023) support this classification, but also note the inherent complexity of academic careers, which are in constant flux, partly due to the ever-changing environments within which modern academia exists. Van Helden et al.

(2023) suggest that the standard or traditional perception of success within an academic career is grounded in upward career mobility based on a series of fixed career steps. Usually, this may be experienced as completion of a PhD, followed by subsequent progression through positions as a Post Doctoral Researcher or Fellow, Junior Academic (Lecturer or Assistant Professor), Senior Academic (Senior Lecturer or Associate Professor), Reader, and then Professor. Alternatively, Mantai and Marrone (2023) suggest that there are four stages to a career as an academic, primarily from PhD to Professor. That said, however, there appears to be a lack of consistency across Europe as to what seniority entails. In the United Kingdom (UK), the more senior an academic, the more likely they are to be research focused, whilst in Norway the opposite may be true. Similarly, in the UK, junior members of staff often concentrate more on teaching, while in Germany they would focus more on service (Mantai & Marrone, 2023).

The academic career may be considered somewhat unique as a knowledge-based occupation (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). One criticism of the academic career is that it is founded in insecurity (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). Likewise, the "casualization of academic labour" has long been of concern within academia (Vernon, 2011 p. 45). Perpetuated within this is the 'publish or perish' phenomenon, in which research output, performance, and the development of knowledge have become increasingly important for the development of an academic career (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). However, Van Helden et al. (2023) also note the potential impact of career shocks, that is, personal or professional events that can disrupt a career and impact career choices. Career shocks may have both positive and negative impacts, notably in helping to focus identity or in delaying advancement. Any such occurrences can therefore impact on the evolving process that is the academic career (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). Ultimately, an individual academic is not the single actor in their career journey (Beigi, 2023). Dixon et al. (2020) for example discuss the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on their careers and the career shock it created.

The concept of the boundaryless career has also often been associated with academia (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This has been challenged by Pudelko and Tenzer (2019), who suggest that for many academics, their careers are bounded by factors outside the role, such as language. This is particularly the case, they suggest, in situations when language disparity can impact employment opportunities, most notably in those instances in which there is a difference between one's own language and the national language of the host country. That said, Seopa et al. (2015) suggest that academics are not necessarily focused on career progression in a traditional way, but more so in terms of developing their skillset and experiences in order to be more attractive to other employers, thereby linking academics with the notion of a boundaryless career. Central to such processes are notions of academic standing and rigour, which are often developed through attaining success in research and publications. Many academics do however also see a value in what they do, that is, what they perceive to be the underlying role and purpose of education (Rawn & Fox, 2018).

A key aspect for those interested in pursuing a career in academia is highlighted by Abell and Becker (2021), who discuss approaches to making universities more attractive to future academics, in essence becoming an employer of choice. They ask the question of what makes certain universities more attractive than others. Beigi (2023) at the recent University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) conference, raised the question as to where the next batch of academics is coming

from. Abell and Becker (2021) identify five key features: reputation of the institution (this may be research or teaching influenced, or contextual related aspects such as financial stability, managerial style, etc.); career development opportunities; organizational culture and climate; the characteristics of the job role; and the physical environment, which may also influence an individuals' choice of employer and the career path they take. Such issues also link, however, to the need to better understand the experiences, expectations and perceptions of academics about their roles and the underlying purpose(s) of higher education.

Academics and the Psychological Contract

A key focus within the academic literature surrounding the psychological contract has been on academia itself (Rousseau, 1990). Several authors including Costa and Oliveira (2022), Gu et al. (2021), Moussa (2019) and Sewpersad et al. (2019) have all recently considered the psychological contract of academics in response to the changing face of academia. Key to this is changing perceptions of the role of the academic, as well as changing individual expectations and aspirations that the role entails. Underpinning such changing perceptions is the new public management approach that has reshaped the higher education landscape (Deem & Brehony, 2005), but which is also leading to changing perceptions regarding the relative attractiveness of the role. This type of managerialist approach, coupled with an increase in the mechanization of processes and measurement of activity, has potentially had a negative impact on the psychological contract for academic staff.

According to O'Neill et al. (2010), key influencers in the psychological contract are the academic role, whether the role is rewarding, levels of job satisfaction and opportunities for career progression. Shen (2010) suggests that academics tend to have a relational psychological contract, but questions whether they truly develop a link or bond with their employer or are more aligned to their discipline. However, it has been argued regularly over the last few decades that there has been a decline in the psychological contract due to changes in working practices that have been brought about by changing managerialist ideologies (Bathmaker, 1999; Nutakki et al., 2015; Stone-Romero, 2009).

It is often argued that university (and individual) success is built on the manifestation of the psychological contract through notions of goodwill and discretionary effort, particularly as ever-extending workload requirements have resulted in many academics working beyond expected capacity. This has often resulted in induced discretionary effort, rather than a free will offering (Ramdhony & Francis, 2014). Rawn and Fox (2018) suggest a 40:40:20 model in which research and teaching each account for 40% of the role, and service the other 20%. However, they found that engagement in research had a perceived prevalence over teaching in terms of importance, as had also previously been identified by Lacy and Sheehan (1997) who closely linked success in research with promotion opportunities.

Academic Identity

The concept of identity offers a historical, present, and future perspective on ourselves (Brown, 2015). The organization (previous, current, and future) will have a significant influence on an individual's identity (Baruch & Hall, 2004), as it will often dictate individual views and perceptions of the role. Brown (2015) therefore suggests a linkage between identity and work undertaken, acknowledging the inherent levels of complexity within the academic role. This necessitates careful reflection on what is felt to be important to the individual academic and how/what they should prioritize (Reed, 2017). Such issues are further complicated, not least given that Beigi (2023) suggests that we should do

what makes us happy, while Warhurst (2008) notes the importance of fitting in with one's community, and McCune (2021) emphasizes the reluctance of an individual to stand out. A key part of academic identity is therefore influenced by what an academic prioritizes, which is further influenced by where they see the importance of their role and their individual psychological contract. As previously discussed, Rawn and Fox (2018) identify three aspects to the academic role as part of their 40:40:20 model. However, Bathmaker (1999) used the term 'Janus faced' to suggest that most academics often focus on doing what they believe to be important. As such, academic identity often tends to be split into being either research orientated or teaching orientated, with the former often carrying much more kudos for promotion opportunities and career advancement.

A key aspect for academic identity relates to an underlying desire to appear credible and authentic (Budge et al., 2016). How an academic is recognized often comes down to their orientation towards either teaching or research. Often, research will manifest as the greater and more prestigious of the two, as it tends to be more external facing (Lambrovska & Todorova, 2021). Such aspects speak further towards the 'publish or perish' culture that has become prevalent within the university sector (Aprile et al., 2021), or as Lambrovska and Todorova (2021) more optimistically put it, publish and flourish. In itself, that becomes problematic, as there then becomes a race to measure research. For example, in the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) uses metrics to measure the perceived quality of outputs, thus further driving academics more towards research as an integral aspect of academic identity (Grove, 2016), and/or leading towards the introduction of teaching only contracts as a means of either challenging or confirming an underlying academic identity (Rawn & Fox, 2018).

Whether an academic is more research-focused or more teaching-orientated can often be linked to issues of motivation and the drivers that sit behind the individual (Johnston, 2016). While it may be argued that academics, in the words of Maslow, self-actualize, it is noticeable that they also often wish to remain part of the communities in which they practice (Warhurst, 2008). There can however be competing interests in terms of who they wish to commune with and whether allegiances lie with their institution, their faculty, school or department, their academic or professional body, or even their research area (Johnston, 2017). Such issues can lead to choices and prioritization of activity and may, perhaps, also influence their take on academic citizenship and collaboration.

Issues of Imposter Syndrome within Academia

Shreffler et al. (2023, p. 5) describe the concept of academic imposter syndrome as "persistent thoughts of intellectual phoniness and fraudulence". They note that such concerns often emerge from a deep-rooted sense that an individual is failing the people around them through a lack of competence and knowledge. As a concept, imposter syndrome is rooted primarily in research from the 1970s conducted by Clance and Imes (1978), who focused on successful career women. More recently, research acknowledges the existence of imposter syndrome across all genders.

A significant manifestation of imposter syndrome is the failure to accept praise, believing that it has not been earned (Hutchins, 2015), and instead is a result of luck and circumstance (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). This is reinforced by Wilkinson (2020), who puts her career down to luck and timing initially but does go on to identify the hard work that got her there. Zorn (2005) suggested that underlying culture within the higher education sector is at the core of Academic Imposter Syndrome, noting issues such as valuing

product over process, subject interest isolation, ultra and often aggressive competitiveness, specialism over interdisciplinary, and a lack of support systems through effective mentoring. While not focusing on imposter syndrome, Warhurst (2008) recognizes the importance of identity and 'fitting in' as key features in academic life. How academics feel in comparison to their colleagues – whether they feel they have sufficient knowledge, whether they have published, or whether they feel they have the necessary underlying skills – are the types of questions that are often asked. Imposter syndrome can adversely affect self-talk and self-perception, as people look to establish themselves within the environment.

Existing literature regarding imposter syndrome often highlights potential negative impacts on job satisfaction, performance, and wellbeing. However, it is also suggested that opportunities can exist to reduce imposter syndrome through access to resilience building resources whilst acknowledging the "thirst for training and personal growth" that many academics possess (Bravata et al., 2020, p. 1272). Significantly, Bothello and Roulet (2019) suggest that Graduate School is often the base for imposter syndrome. They suggest that the focus on theory, and more importantly theoretical contribution, twisted their view on what academia was all about, shifting away from practical problem solving to conceptualizing.

The publish or perish culture that is prevalent within contemporary higher education is also a key driver in creating imposter syndrome (Bothello & Roulet, 2019), with such feelings often further exacerbated by job adverts and promotion requirements. The focus within higher education on research outputs has become significant and, with that, additional pressure to publish in 'high quality' journals has also intensified as a result of the increasing importance of REF rankings. According to Bothello and Roulet (2019), the increasing intensification of research can lead to a focus on short-termism and standalone projects, which do not look to solve the underlying issue. Indeed, this focus on research outputs had also been at the core of Zorn's (2005) examination of faults or issues within the higher education sector almost 20 years ago.

Demographic Characteristics

Several authors have evidenced the idea that demographics can impact on career choices, most notably gender and social status (social class), particularly in the formative years of schooling and education (Angervall & Beach, 2020; Brown & Lent, 2017; Manne-Goehler et al., 2020; Pugh et al., 2021). Pugh et al. (2021) investigated the impact of gender on career choices, more particularly in the decision-making process on subject choices when applying to university. They note identity as being more important to women than men. This builds upon ideas put forward by Packard and Nguyen (2003), who highlighted the greater importance of family orientated goals over those of career orientated goals for many women. In a similar vein, Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston (2006) note an underlying bias in the education system within Spain, which can at times provide a barrier against female career trajectories. Manne-Goehler et al. (2020) also suggest that females can experience lower levels of self-esteem than males, perhaps emerging in part from educational restrictions, amongst other potential influences.

Alongside this, Poole et al. (1990) highlight the fundamental interrelated relationship between gender and social status, suggesting that females from lower socio-economic backgrounds have often traditionally had more limited career aspirations, and as such have perhaps been less inclined to aspire to educational attainment as those from a higher social status. Such trends are not however gender specific, as Brown and Lent (2017)

suggest that people with a higher social-class status are likely to expect more from their career. Such findings suggest a potential constraint on career aspirations and educational attainment amongst some socio-cultural groups. As such, this may influence the choice of university to study at – including the decision on whether to study at a more research intensive (and traditionally more prestigious) university, or one that is perhaps more teaching focused – as well as subsequent career choices and/or career opportunities that may subsequently be available.

Once in an academic role, Barrett and Barrett (2011) highlight allocation of work and workloads as potential causes and risks of stilted career development for females within academia. Vohlídalová (2021) argues that women are under-represented in academic roles. More specifically, research conducted in Nordic countries suggests a gendered disparity in academia, with female academics having relatively little representation in senior roles and perhaps being over-represented in lower-level positions (Silander et al., 2022). Angervall and Beach (2020) likewise acknowledge additional barriers faced by women in academia within the Swedish higher education system, noting that change is happening, but not at the point that many women were starting out in their academic careers. As Park (2007) suggested, there has often traditionally been a greater need for women to 'prove' their legitimacy as academics, than has often traditionally been the case for men. The need to continually prove themselves has often given rise to issues of gender inequality within academia, more particularly within the context of developing an academic career.

Methodology

The research takes a combined auto-ethnographic and reflective approach as adopted by Bishop et al. (2022) in which the authors reflect on their own personal experience and the development of their own careers. This use of a combined philosophy adds rigour (Johnston, 2014) and trustworthiness to the process (Feather, 2012), which has greater importance given that the basis of the research is personal reflection. As such this must be acknowledged as a potential issue due to the subjective nature of reflections, particularly those that will need to span several decades in some cases. In doing so, the authors recognize the potential failings or limitations of interpretation and evaluation, noting that many instances are viewed through an historical lens and as such a 'halo or horns' effect may be present, creating a level of bias and influenced by perceptual filters (Voros, 2005). This in itself does not however detract from the underlying rigour of the research, as such reflections are 'true' reflections on memory and are rooted in philosophical beliefs informed by epistemology and ontology (Saunders et al., 2009). A similar approach was adopted by Carson and Niklasson (2023), who acknowledge similar challenges and limitations.

McIlveen (2008, p. 3) explains autoethnography as "the … practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon". Similarly, Sparkes (2000, p. 21) suggests that the method provides "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding". Such approaches thus produce rich data that provide an insight into a private world of personal experiences (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007), enabling the researcher to transition from the outside of the project to being on the inside of the research (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

Data are drawn from four academics (authors of the paper) through an auto-ethnographic account (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), using a reflective process to consider how they got to this

point of their career. The selection of the four academics was drawn from knowledge of their career paths and, as such, the participants have been identified for the purpose of this paper as [1] Career Academic, [2] Teacher turned Academic, [3] Second-career Academic and [4] Late Bloomer Academic. Each academic wrote a short reflective statement based on three questions: (1) How did you get to where you are now?; (2) What barriers did you encounter along the way?; (3) What would you do differently?

Table 1
Contributor Characteristics

Contributor	Identifier	Gender	Age	Self-Perceived Social Status	Doctoral Status
1	Career Academic	Male	40	Middle-class	Achieved 2012
2	Teacher turned Academic	Male	53	Working-class	Achieved 2021
3	Second-career Academic	Female	49	Working-class	Second year PhD Candidate
4	Late Bloomer Academic	Male	36	Middle-class	First year PhD Candidate

The majority of studies on academic careers have been small-scale and based on the lived experiences of academics (Mantai & Marrone, 2023), and this research follows suit. Each academic draws on their own experience of how they have come to be where they are today. Each reflection was then analysed, with key themes developed using open manual coding (Saunders et al., 2009). Data were then grouped in order to bring together key themes under associated headings.

Findings and Discussion

Career Journey

The findings identify that the four contributors have followed different career paths to where they are now. The career academic [1] has followed a somewhat traditional path into the academic role, having followed through their undergraduate and postgraduate studies, onto a doctorate and then into an academic role. This was punctuated by gaining some teaching experience along the way, while undertaking their doctorate. The teacher-come-academic [2] followed a less traditional route, but perhaps one well-trodden, in working within the further education sector and then moving into higher education. Interestingly, he flirted with the higher education sector both prior to and whilst working full time in further education. The second-career academic [3] had a successful career working in the third sector and owning her own business. She took up the opportunity to undertake a top up degree and a master's degree full time, with no clear strategy beyond. She was offered the chance to deliver some seminars following completion of her master's. She took the opportunity and has now moved into a full-time academic role, undertaking a PhD in-service. The late-bloomer academic [4] had meandered through their early career with limited focus. They had returned to academia later in life following an epiphany moment and encouragement from their dying grandma. They subsequently completed their degree and moved onto a Masters. While studying for the master's, they started teaching at a local college, before getting the opportunity to teach at university. To some extent, [4] had followed the path of [2]. However, it is fair to say that [2] had settled in a career within further education having spent thirteen years in full time

posts spanned across three different colleges, holding management positions in all three.

All four academics note career shocks (Dixon et al., 2020; Van Helden et al., 2023) within their journey to where they are now. Two [1 and 2] noted key career shocks that have changed their focus significantly. [1] recalls being *"put at risk of potential compulsory redundancy"* following a restructuring of the portfolio of courses on offer, resulting in a move into a different discipline area and school within the university. Likewise, [2] has changed role focus since "'not getting a senior position at the last restructure'". This has required him to review his role and he has started to focus more on the research aspect of his career progression. [3] recognizes the career shock of "'the pandemic'" as a key point. She was in the process of completing her Masters, as Covid-19 struck and delivery was moved online, as we were all told to work and study from home. This online delivery opened up the opportunity to provide seminar support to students the following year. The late-bloomer academic [4] does not use the word career shock but implies a negative experience within the college where he is working. In line with Akkermans et al. (2018), he has however experienced a disruption. He points to the notion of a blame culture and the lack of nurturing as a reason for his shift in employer.

All four academics, however, identify with autonomy and the challenge in the role as career anchors (Schein, 2010), while also recognizing career orientation (Rodrigues et al., 2013) in the forms of career advancement, challenge, and autonomy and independence. A key point to note is [3] having a high form of loyalty to the organization where she has studied at all levels and is grateful of the opportunities that have been afforded to her. [4] also considers the concept of "'mental challenge'" in the role as crucial to their essence and fundamental nature.

Imposter Syndrome

All participants reflected on the existence of imposter syndrome within their career, both during their career development and continuing to where they are now. Much of these feelings of imposter syndrome come from the baggage that each of them has carried through their lives. [1] the career academic notes that he was "'first in family'" to attend university, but specifically identifies the key occurrence of imposter syndrome "'as I made initial tentative steps into [teaching in] the classroom'". In contrast, however, the teacher turned academic [2] makes no mention of teaching but draws out "'*being introduced to a new Professor'"* when starting to work at the university and being asked "'what their specialist area was'". While both of these examples relate directly to the key dual role of teaching and research within academia, they approach such issues from very different perspectives. The career academic [1] who has followed the route from undergraduate through postgraduate to doctoral, does not appear phased by the notion of research and specialism. However, the teacher turned academic [2] has spent many years within the classroom environment and is challenged by the notion of a specialized area, linking notions of imposter syndrome more to research. Both are stepping out of their comfort zone. Both it would seem were experiencing imposter syndrome as perceived by Shreffler et al. (2023), while it is also evident that the environment as portrayed by Zorn (2005) had an impact on the teacher turned academic. It would appear that at this point both individuals have predominantly overcome their imposter syndrome:

> I enrolled on a postgraduate course that provided an induction to learning and teaching within higher education and that led to accreditation with the Higher Education Academy. Through such networks, those feelings of imposter

> syndrome gradually started to decrease, not least following experiences in the classroom where it became evident that I did actually have something important to contribute" [1].

At the same time [2] notes:

> I established my credentials within [Department] taking on responsibilities for programme management and validations, which was within my comfort zone ... I opted in, I had found my initial specialism. As my DBA progressed, I found myself developing more and more … a more recognizable area of specialism ... Having published a paper … I felt I had some credibility. I suffer from not feeling worthy, good enough or intelligent enough. Seeing a paper in a published journal as well as giving an ego boost, help me feel part of the HE [higher education] community, rather than someone masquerading as a university lecturer.

In a similar vein [1] suffered further periods of imposter syndrome when entering his first full time academic position and feeling "'the need to prove myself again'" particularly in concerns that others had "'more experience and a wider range of publications'", and similarly when moving post internally and moving into a new academic school. The teacher turned academic [2] however does still temper this with a final comment that he still feels "'out of his depth'" occasionally.

The second career academic [3], however, appears to still be in that mainstay of imposter syndrome. Akin to the work of Clance and Imes (1978), she can be termed a successful woman, having had a successful career prior to starting in academia. Despite acknowledging how hard she has worked, she still appears to feel unworthy (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Hutchins, 2015; Wilkinson, 2020), noting: "'Writing that I am an academic frankly feels a little ridiculous me". Some of this she links to theory using Tedlock's (2000) views on women, ethnography and self-image. She notes "I was certain that the students would see that I was not as wise or knowledgeable as the other tutors on their course'". The late-bloomer academic [4] suffered from imposter syndrome when it came to undertaking assessments, noting that he would "'often question if [I] got assessment correct through luck rather than competence" following the moderation process, linking with the ideas of Bravata et al. (2020). He was also concerned at the prospect of "supervising master's students". He has taken sanctuary in the value of qualifications, having achieved a PGCE and now starting a PhD.

Identity and Aspiration

Primarily, each of the four academics see themselves as being 'teaching orientated', having focused on the importance of teaching as their route into what they do. Only [2] was following a path that was not primarily all about teaching. His career was linked to a management role. While [1] had taken the traditional route with a research focus, namely a PhD, he was still initially teaching focused. Both [3] and [4] have come into academia with a focus on teaching but have recognized the importance of research and are both undertaking their doctorates, with [2] similarly only undertaking his doctorate once in post. All four, as such, recognize the importance of the doctorate, both in terms of credibility and identity, recognizing the important focus of research within the higher education community (Brown, 2015; Warhurst, 2008). It is no surprise however that all four are employed in a post 1992, former College of Higher Education. That said, all four are research engaged and research active, as they recognize the important place of research within the higher education environment and therefore see it as important to their role and career progression (Reed, 2017). Even [2],

despite initially following a managerial career path recognized the importance of publishing as giving credibility and helping to overcome the notion of *"someone masquerading as a university lecturer"*. Interestingly, both [1] and [2] emphasized the need to progress, do more research and, more particularly, make themselves more credible and attractive to alternative employers through more regular and continued production of research outputs, suggesting for example that *"much of my focus has turned to research"* [2].

Psychological Contract

Each academic appears to speak fondly of their institution and, despite the career shocks that have impacted [1] and [2], there would appear to be a relational psychological contract (Rousseau, 1990). The second-career academic [3] actually made reference to the transactional psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1990) of her previous employments linking into her ultimate resignations due to psychological contract breach, in which management *"had not kept their word"*. She talks about *"loyalty"* to the University for giving her the opportunity and developing her *"self-belief"*. At the same time, she also recognizes the support systems that have helped her to develop. In a similar vein, [4] recognizes the links to the institution and the building of their own psychological contract.

Due to the career shock identified earlier, [1] recognizes the impact that the threat of redundancy had on his employment relationship. He did not however feel that this breach had had a significant and long-lasting impact on his psychological contract. That said, had he remained in the same school, he may perhaps have felt differently. The move into a different school perhaps deflected some of the disappointment and hurt felt, and under new and unconnected conditions, he has continued his career and rebuilt or redefined his relationship with the institution. Similarly, [2] notes that he feels that his psychological contract has been damaged, but not breached and violated, stating *"While not feeling that my psychological contract has been breached and violated, I would definitely suggest damage has occurred"*. This is partly offset by identifying a different route and perhaps creating a new and different identity. Both [1] and [2] while recognizing that they feel let down by the institution in those career shock situations are still happy to continue to be employed and thus work for their employer. However, there is suggestion in line with the literature that the psychological contract is a little less relational at times (Shen, 2010).

Each academic identifies with O'Neill et al.'s (2010) view of the academic role being rewarding, with opportunities for career progression and a high level of job satisfaction, with [3] suggesting that it does not "feel like work". [1] and [2] both discuss how their career has developed and how they have taken up opportunities for development, while [4] recognizes the differences in attitude towards the role and the importance placed on a supportive environment.

Demographic Characteristics

It is evident from all four accounts that initial social status characteristics as identified by Brown and Lent (2017) have influenced all four contributors to the paper, either through routes they have taken to get where they are or, alternatively, their initial choice of university and path from that point onwards. Most evident of this are [3] and [4], neither of whom followed a traditional (by age) progression through schooling into university. As the only female amongst the respondents, [3] most comparably identified with the findings of Poole et al. (1990), perhaps a reflection of age and expectation of 'that' generation, but also characterized by key issues around gender as identified by Pugh et al. (2021) and Manne-Goehler (2020).

Notably, the route from undergraduate to doctorate took a different turn for each contributor. [1] who took the traditional route through higher education, undertook their undergraduate studies at a more research focused institution, before undertaking postgraduate study and doctorate at a more teaching focused institution. However, [2], [3] and [4] all started their progression at a teaching orientated institution, before continuing their study through onto postgraduate level at a similar grade of institution. [4] has however opted to undertake his doctoral studies at a more research-intensive institution.

Conclusion

Despite following very different routes, all four contributors have found themselves working as academics in a higher education university environment. Each individual has brought with them different types of baggage and prior experiences that have shaped who they are as academics, what they focus on and what they believe is important. Key to this has been a series of processes and factors that have helped to inform them and influence their activity. These features have included the journey that each of them has taken, thereby also helping to explain some of the career choices they may have made. Such decisions have then influenced their identity, which has also informed and influenced the psychological contract. Fundamental to all four academics has been consideration of how they have all been affected by feelings of imposter syndrome at differing points of their career journeys.

Theoretical Implications

This article contributes to current literature by considering routes to a career in academia. Most academics would generally follow a traditional career route into academia, which would consist of undertaking a PhD before moving into an academic role. This article considers individual routes through the eyes of each of the four participants, but also considers the alternative routes taken by three of the contributors. Whilst there have been some similarities, all four have accessed their role via somewhat different trajectories. As such, the article contributes a reflective review and account of the complex ways in which academics can move into academia.

Practical Implications

The article makes a significant practical contribution by emphasizing that there is not just one route into academia. It considers the challenges and pitfalls of different routes and would be of significant interest for those not borne to academia via a more traditional academic route, who may have followed a different career path initially. It may be argued that such points are particularly important for those who are considering the possibility of a career change into academia, or perhaps looking for an academic career in a vocational area, where experience may be seen as an invaluable asset.

In particular, the article also enlightens the path taken by four distinct individuals as well as the hurdles and barriers they have faced over time, whilst also emphasizing that all have come to an equitable point. The article should therefore provide an inspiration for those from different backgrounds, who may perhaps feel that the same opportunities are not necessarily available to them as are available for others, given the clear indication that opportunities can often come along at different stages of life.

Limitations and Future Research

The research is done, purposefully, on a small-scale to allow the stories of four individuals to flow through. It draws on their personal reflections in order to pull

out key thoughts and memories. It is these memories which may bring with them limitations on the research. Future research may consider expanding the number of contributors, and the spread of cognisant discipline areas, which may potentially help to develop further in-depth insights to the lived experiences of academics, as well as expand focus and avoid characteristics that are perhaps common or specific within one discipline area. A key development will include greater research into demographic factors such as gender and social class, providing opportunities to further review and analyse the impact that such issues may potentially have both on entry into academia and subsequent career development. This may likewise include scope for further consideration of those early steps in the career development journey, including choice of university for undergraduate studies as a key initial entry point.

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About the authors

Dr Alan Johnston

Alan Johnston has a DBA from the University of Huddersfield. He is a Senior Lecturer in Management and Organisational Development at York Business School. He has over 25 years of experience teaching and managing within the Higher and Further Education Sectors. He has held strategic and operational responsibility for large teams of staff and substantial budgets and is experienced in performance management, recruitment and selection, and operational planning. His research interest focuses on the management of, and behaviours within, organisations. He currently Co-Chairs the People in Employment Settings (PiES) Research Group within York St John University.

Dr Steven Cock

Steven Cock is a Senior Lecturer in Business and Management and Programme Leader for the MBA programme in York Business School at York St John University. He has now worked in higher education for more than a decade, specialising primarily in areas linked to sports, events, leisure, hospitality and tourism management. His research interests include the examination of long-term processes of organisational structure and change, as well as analysing underpinning power dynamics relating to a range of contemporary issues in modern business and workplace settings. He is currently Co-Chair of the People in Employment Settings (PiES) Research Group at York St John University.

Susie Walsh

Susie Walsh is a Lecturer in Leadership and Human Resource Management at York Business School. She is an early career academic who returned to education following a successful career in education and the third sector. She has a diverse range of research interests that reflect her interest and passion for exploring critical issues in society. Areas of research interest include leadership and organisational effectiveness and issues relating to social justice. These interrelated areas of research provide opportunities to explore the impact of leadership and organisations in creating a more equitable and just society.

Stuart Healy

Stuart Healy is an associate lecturer in York Business School at York St John University and a PhD student in Loughborough Business School at Loughborough University. Having previously worked in the hospitality sector Stuart has worked in further and higher education since 2018. His research interests include biodiversity disclosure (PhD area of research), environmental disclosure, corporate governance, CSR, business ethics and motivation. He is currently part of several research groups including People in Employment Settings (PiES).