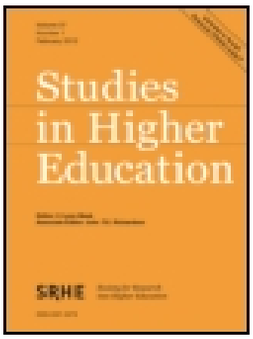

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Pracademics? Exploring transitions and professional identities in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of a competitive UK Higher Education (HE) environment, this paper explores the transitions made by former or current practitioners who are now university academics, referred to in this study (and others) as 'pracademics'. Drawing together the concepts of pracademia, academic selves and professional identity, this paper makes a tri-fold contribution. First, this case study examines pracademics' perceptions from a post-1992, UK-based higher education institution (HEI) through collaborative reflexivity. Secondly, it suggests how pracademics' professional self-identities can be fluid and context-dependent. Thirdly, it explores affinities and tensions between academia and practice, and identifies opportunities for building links between them. In doing so, the research makes a number of specific recommendations. The authors advocate for the recruitment of academics with practitioner experience and the facilitation of their effective transition into and within the HEI environment.

KEYWORDS

Practice-informed teaching; professional identity; imposter phenomenon; career transitions; pracademic

Introduction

The changing economic context of the HE sector, including its increased marketisation, is well-documented. Sursock (2015) notes how:

> the deepening economic crisis has had a negative impact on the newly gained institutional autonomy and on institutional budgets … [and] the weak economic outlook … and the increase in youth unemployment in many parts of Europe have prompted … the necessity for higher education to respond to economic and social needs, enhance the employability of graduates … [and strengthen] university-business partnerships. (Sursock 2015, 11).

The moral-economic logic of neoliberalism (Davies 2014) makes competition a normative principle in society. The Government clearly outline their belief that 'competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game' and 'Higher Education is no exception' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2016, 8). Consequently, HEIs are bidding for recognition through playing the 'rankings game'; increasingly directing their attention to market classification and brand-building (Amsler and Bolsmann 2012, 284) to help generate demand (Gibbons, Neumayer, and Perkins 2015) and secure market share (Bennett and Ali-Choudhury 2009). Critics of this approach cite the changing function of universities from a force for social good (Collini 2012) and places of intellectual enquiry (McCowan 2015), to places of 'performativity' focussed on 'measures and comparisons of output' (Ball 2012, 19).

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In the development of their brands, and in comparison to their traditionally research-focussed counterparts, post-1992[1] HEIs have emphasised their vocational excellence and links with practice (Chapleo 2004). The literature recognises how such 'industry-university collaborations' (Rybnicek and Königsgruber 2019, 221) could be beneficial to the economy and wider society (see, for example, Myoken 2013; Barnes, Pashby, and Gibbons 2002; Ankrah and Al-Tabbaa 2015). Recruitment of 'those who have occupied significant positions as both academics and practitioners' (Posner 2009, 16) could help HEIs to deliver on their strategic promises, namely preparing students to meet the need for a high-skilled workforce (BIS 2016). Yet, Pilcher et al. (2017), Forster et al. (2017) and Tennant et al. (2015) argue that the Research Excellence Framework (2014) (REF) has resulted in some HEIs preferring to recruit those primarily involved in producing high quality research outputs, namely 'career academics', (Pilcher et al. 2017, 1467; Tennant et al. 2015, 724) at the expense of employing staff with relevant industrial experience. Further, Pilcher et al. (2017, 80) argue that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) White Paper (BIS 2016) and Graduate Level Apprenticeships (GLA) reposition teaching as 'centre stage' and demonstrate the UK government's recognition of a pedagogical need to recouple HE with industry.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the perceptions of pracademics with diverse professional backgrounds about issues that may exist between the domains of practice and academia, and any associated changes to their professional identities during their career transitions. Developing Posner's definition (2009), this paper defines 'pracademics' to encompass both former and/or current practitioners who are now academics within HE (as opposed to compulsory or further education). Whilst Wenger (1998) dichotomously suggests that pracademics may develop dual senses of self as both practitioners and academics, van Maanen and Schein (1977) note the potential for them to create entirely new professional identities. This paper explores whether the lived realities of pracademics' career transitions, and their self-perceptions, may be more fluctuating and liminal in nature. In making a tri-fold contribution, this paper first provides an in-depth examination of pracademics' perceptions from a post-1992, UK-based HEI through processes of collaborative reflexivity. Second, it explores how the professional self-identities of pracademics may be more fluid and context-dependent than the existing literature would suggest. Third, it investigates some of the affinities and tensions between the worlds of academia and practice, and those inhabiting them, before making recommendations for building links between them for mutual benefit.

In structuring its discussion, the paper begins by explaining how its underpinning conceptual framework draws together theories of pracademia, academic selves and professional identity and posits the research questions. After outlining the case study approach that was adopted for this investigation, the paper reports on the research findings around the two themes of practice-informed teaching and professional identities. Finally, the paper explores how the findings develop understanding of pracademics' academic selves and professional identity and, in doing so, makes recommendations for pracademics and HEIs, and identifies opportunities for further research.

Pracademia

Perceiving pracademia as a dichotomous proposition, Murphy and Fulda believe that the career journey of the pracademic is best illustrated via the metaphor of a 'revolving door' (2011, 279) through which pracademics make their transitions between academia and practice. Posner (2009) instead suggests that pracademia is best viewed along a continuum; an individual's positioning being determined by both the permanency and length of time spent within each discipline (see Wood, Farmer, and Goodall; Gourlay 2011; Shreeve 2010; Boyd and Harris 2010). Regardless of these differing perceptions, the literature indicates the multiple benefits that pracademics can provide. Operationally, within their teaching role, pracademics are well-positioned to support students in becoming 'knowledge-able, not knowledgeable' by utilising their practitioner experience to encourage students to develop their own theories through constructivist learning (Wilson 2015,

29). Strategically, pracademics' multi-domain experiences enable them to forge networks and facilitate industry-university collaborations (Posner 2009).

This paper considers whether these operational and strategic abilities may depend on the currency of the pracademics' practical skills, experience, knowledge and contact networks. Depending on their discipline, some pracademics, including solicitors (Solicitors Regulation Authority n.d.) and health care professionals (Health and Care Professions Council 2019), may need to demonstrate either professional development or continued competence to remain in practice. Even without such requirements, pracademics may wish to keep up-to-date with practice for their own personal development. Drawing on research by Willis (2016), this paper explores the extent of any organisational barriers to maintaining such currency.

Whilst this discussion has focused on pracademics' discipline-specific knowledge (McCabe, Morreale, and Tahiliani 2016), the literature also recognises the variety of pracademics' skill sets; including their ability to:

> abstract ideas, principles and strategies from established findings … synthesize [them] to create policy and practice … design, implement and execute evaluations of existing strategies and new innovations … understand the cultures and languages of both domains [and] translate within and across [them] … [and] employ their knowledge to … guide an organization [to develop] an organizational culture receptive to new ideas and innovation (Huey and Mitchell 2016, 306).

Other research has cautioned against over-championing the pracademic in this way; instead suggesting that both career academics and pracademics need to perceive each other as equals to fully benefit from their shared skills, experience and knowledge pools (Willis 2016). This paper examines the affinities and tensions that may arise from these two groups' occupation of 'separate worlds with often different and conflicting values, different reward systems, and different languages' (Caplan 1979, 459). It recognises that such tensions may lead pracademics to doubt their worth and display 'fragile academic selves' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 335) as they transition into academia. The combination of 'fragile academic selves' and the formation of professional identity are considered in the following discussion of this conceptual framework.

Fragile academic selves

One type of 'fragile academic sel[f]' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 335) is demonstrated through the 'imposter phenomenon' (Clance and Imes 1978, 241). This occurs when individuals undermine themselves (Pedler 2011) and experience low levels of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), despite being able to evidence their success (Sakulku and Alexander 2011). Leonhardt, Bechtoldt and Rohrmann suggest that this happens when individuals convince themselves that they have fooled their external environment into believing that they have certain capabilities and competences, and fear that they will be exposed (2017). Neuriter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) note the impact on individual performance, career development and mental health, diagnosing symptoms of 'procrastination … , stress, anxiety and demotivation' (Parkman 2016, 55).

Knights and Clarke identify two other types of 'fragile academic selves' (2014, 335); the 'aspirants' (2014, 343) and the 'existentialists' (2014, 345). Aspirants are described as being those who seek to develop their careers, believing that the security of their professional identities rests on their continued achievement (Knights and Clarke 2014). Existentialists doubt their professional identities because they perceive that they lack autonomy, and constantly grapple between career progression, and finding meaning from their work (Knights and Clarke 2014). Whichever one (or more) of these self-identities manifest themselves, their existence may lead to 'excessive over-commitment' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 349), as individuals strive to secure 'illusive, if not entirely illusory' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 352) professional identities, and experience 'reduced career optimism' (Neuriter and Traut-Mattausch 2016, 9). Such professional identity dilemmas may also present institutional consequences; for example, these individuals may experience emotional withdrawal (Neuriter and Traut-Mattausch 2016).

To address these issues, Clark, Vardeman, and Barba (2014) highlight the importance of relationship-building between new employees and their supervisors to ward off the development of insecure professional identities. Whilst Neuriter and Traut-Mattausch suggest that organisations should also nurture employees' 'career optimism, career adaptability and their knowledge of the job market' (2016, 3), Leonhardt, Bechtoldt, and Rohrmann (2017) identify an additional need for specific interventions, including coaching, to facilitate recognition that feelings of incompetence do not always relate to actual performance. Laursen (2008) suggests how employee-engagement in peer-group dialogues may also help to combat issues around professional identity.

Professional identity

Professional identity has evolved as a topic of interest due to the rapid pace of change in people's working lives from the late twentieth century (Schein 1972). The literature documents various manifestations of both organisational culture and professional identity. These include: rules and ideology (van Maanen and Schein 1977); shared stories (Loftus 2010); emotion (O'Connor 2008); communities of practice (Wenger 1998); and common language (Schein 2010; Richards 2006).

The literature indicates how individuals' professional identities constantly shift and adapt through processes of continuous reflexivity; being created and refined through action (Richards 2006). Craib (1998) outlines two foci for concepts of postmodern identity development: the reflexive process of self-development, and the social construction of identity. Wenger (1998) maintains that aspects of both practice and identity are intertwined through the engagement of individual professionals, who then acknowledge each other within a community of practice. Through the negotiation of meaning – action and interaction within the community, which is influenced by both history and context – individuals make sense of their place within the community of practice. Moving from practice into academia (like all changes in community membership) involves the negotiation of an individual's place within that group. New academics will be socialised into the elements which make up competent practice (Wenger 1998) with newcomers' levels of peer-interaction constituting the most significant factor which influences their ability to feel effective (Louis, Posner, and Powell 1983).

Similarly, as practitioners become competent HE academics, they do not necessarily leave behind their previous community of practice. Wenger's (1998) nexus of multi-membership acknowledges how individuals may belong to a number of different communities of practice. Although these groups potentially involving different ways of being, they do interact and influence one another. Academics with prior or multiple professional identities may therefore perceive some degree of influence on their approach to academia, depending on the peripherality of their 'other' identities.

There are few studies that specifically consider career transitions from practice into HE (Wood, Farmer, and Goodall 2016; Gourlay 2011; Shreeve 2010; Boyd and Harris 2010). This empirical research raises questions about both professional identity in HE (Schein 1972), and communities of practice and HE socialisation processes (Wenger 1998). Wood, Farmer, and Goodall (2016) specifically identify the challenges facing pracademics' professional and personal values as they enter contexts which lack explicit value systems associated with status, authority, decision-making and accountability. They note how this results in pracademics experiencing the 'liminal state' (2016, 230) of being between professional identities. Both Gourlay (2011) and Shreeve (2010) similarly identify such a state when pracademics restructure their personal and professional values to meet the HE expectations of teaching. Boyd and Harris (2010) likewise report how new lecturers focus on those aspects of their role where they can maximise credibility with students to counter any insecurities from operating in their new workplace. Overall, this research illustrates incomplete career transitioning from practice to academia; challenging the assumption that individuals move from one stable professional identity in practice to another within the HE context. The neatness of van Maanen and Schein's (1977) suggestion that pracademics leave the membership of their old workplaces behind, or Wenger's (1998) multi-membership model which examines how pracademics are socialised into their new community, does not quite capture the isolation (Wood, Farmer, and Goodall

2016), liminality (Wood, Farmer, and Goodall 2016; Shreeve 2010, 2011; Gourlay 2011) or suffering involved in the restructuring of an individual's personal and professional values (Gourlay 2011).

Despite pracademics potentially facing such quandaries around their professional identity, the employability agenda encourages HEIs to recruit this group for their abilities to train future professionals (Blass and Hayward 2014). Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) note policy calls on HEIs to develop work-ready graduates through, for example, socialisation processes and learning professional roles. As identified earlier, pracademics are well-placed to bring these two worlds of practice and academia together to help ensure the continued relevance of their professions.

Against the backdrop presented by this combined conceptual framework, comprising: pracademia (Posner 2009), 'fragile academic selves' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 335) and professional identity, this paper posits the following research questions. First, to what extent does experience as either a former and/or current practitioner affect pracademics' approaches to their different career roles? Secondly, to what extent do pracademics believe that they can make contributions within the HEI context? Thirdly, how could pracademics' career transitions affect their perceptions of their professional identities?

Methodology

To answer these questions, this qualitative research utilised a case study (Yin 2018) to explore the perceptions of pracademics at one of the largest, post-1992 UK-based, HEIs. Whilst recognising the inherent restrictions and advantages of this strategy, the researchers drew on the case study to develop both a holistic view and a deeper understanding of these pracademics' lived experiences (Denscombe 2014). Following approval from the HEI's Ethics Committee, participants from across the HEI, at different stages of their careers, were invited to take part in one of six, digitally-recorded focus groups. Whilst such a self-selected sample risked bias, because people who have something to say will volunteer (Sharma 2017), the researchers acknowledged that this bias cannot be eliminated in qualitative research and should instead be recognised in the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Participants were recruited from within the case study via a number of channels, including the staff newsletter and the staff Twitter account. Data was collected from 42 participants who worked within different departments across the HEI including: law and criminology, media, arts and communication, allied health professionals, sports and physical activity, nursing and midwifery, social work and social care, finance, and accounting and business systems. An acknowledged limitation of this study is that demographic information was not collected from the participants.

During the focus groups, participants were encouraged to utilise processes of collaborative reflexivity which is based on the premise that new perspectives can be reached by viewing the same issue from different epistemological positions, and suggests that knowledge is created through disagreements and debate (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). This can be contrasted with 'team reflexivity' (West et al. 2004, 269) which involves reviewing team goals and objectives. The researchers asked the participants the following five open questions: How do you introduce yourself: as an academic or as a practitioner, and why? What do you think that you bring with you from your time spent in practice to your current academic role? How much do you think that your experience in practice informs your approach in academia? Can you think of any specific examples of instances where you believe that your previous experience from practice has shaped your approach in academia, and explain why you think that this was the case? and How does your previous experience as a practitioner either help or hinder your practice as an academic?

Adopting a primary data analysis method, (Bryman 2012), the researchers utilised thematic analysis to develop an insight into the lived realities of career transitioning (Richards 2006) and a constructionist paradigm to illuminate the 'local and sequential construction of meaning' within this HEI (Silverman 2015, 218). Inductively 'working … from the ground up', the researchers first familiarised themselves with all of the data to identify preliminary concepts (Yin 2018, 136) which arose both within and across the six focus group transcripts (Bryman 2012). Utilising processes of both open

coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the researchers repeatedly checked their findings against the preliminary concepts in order to condense and refine them. The researchers initially conducted the data analysis on an individual basis and then developed their findings through processes of 'debriefing' (Given 2008, 200) to ensure consistency.

Findings

In response to the research questions which focus on how practitioner experience affects pracademics': approaches to their roles, beliefs in their ability to make contributions within the HEI context, and perceptions of their professional identities, the analysis revealed two key themes of practice-informed teaching and professional identities. Whilst each of these themes will be considered separately, the findings demonstrate the numerous, inextricable links between them. Direct quotes identify the number of the focus group (FG) from which the transcript was taken.

Practice-informed teaching: 'Prepare them for what it's like in the real world'

This theme explores participants' perceptions of their contributions to teaching and highlights how affinities and tensions are shaped by values from their practitioner backgrounds.

Some participants reflected that their practitioner experiences had provided them with transferable skills which were applicable to their academic and teaching roles. For instance, participants recognised how they had utilised their practitioner work to specifically support their academic pastoral role:

> What [practice] taught me […] is that actually […] people don't fit into a box. So that's the biggest skill I bring is actually I listen […] and quite often our students have a facade that they bring with them […] I think being new to academia, if you come in with that prior knowledge it really helps you to hit the ground running and it gives you some more confidence. (FG5)

Conversely, participants also revealed their concerns about the pressure to support student populations with increasingly complex personal and emotional problems, without appropriate assistance to manage this; one noting how:

> […] the level of counselling and mentoring I've had to do [for students] has had a massive emotional impact on me and there's not sufficient support [for staff]. (FG6)

This account is supported by other studies into the ill-defined pastoral care role of academic staff, and the lack of clarity and support available to individual staff (Hughes et al. 2018). In addition, this could be viewed as an outcome from a lack of peer support, as previously outlined (Laursen 2008), and the lack of recognition by HEIs of the 'time, effort and emotion' required to perform a pastoral care role (Hughes et al. 2018, 5).

There were some examples of practitioner experience leading to innovative practice; for instance, one participant noted how their experience had informed their decisions about course content, and enabled them to design new materials. Another suggested that maintaining links with practice was critical to decisions about learning and teaching design:

> 'liaising and getting in touch with [former colleagues], so actually making sure that your knowledge is still up-to-date, so actually that then impacts on what you're teaching students.' (FG5)

Others explained how their values as practitioners were fundamental to their approach to teaching:

> I think that to be a good architect or designer you've got to understand human needs. We need to design buildings [to keep] humans protected, safe, […] sometimes architecture can be egotistical, and I think if we let this bit of architecture slip we fail our profession. […] I think that I'm incredibly mindful about the types of images I display in my class and how I use images as a means of generating emotional response, a deeper layer of connectivity with the subject. (FG5)

This account of the importance of professional values emerges throughout the findings of this study. The concept of retaining a strong value-base rooted in previous professional identity, whilst at the same time operating within a new sphere of practice, supports Wenger's nexus of multi-membership (1998), but also represents a new dimension to the existing literature.

There were perceptions that practitioner experience was important for providing students with insights into the realities of participants' professional backgrounds by offering a 'lived experience, and an authenticity to the role, because you've been there and done it and can put it into context' (FG1). Yet, there was apprehension that encouraging a critical analysis of current practice might be perceived negatively by students:

> Do you worry you're putting off future practitioners? Because I worry a lot that my teaching does, because it's quite critical […] [I] feel like [my students are thinking] that's another job off the list I thought I might do. (FG1)

This participant may be reflecting on a perception that there is a gulf between expectations of students and academic staff. This could be related to the UK context outlined earlier in this paper, where many students perceive that university is primarily a route to gain knowledge which is necessary for a professional career (Sursock 2015), whilst academic staff, like the participant above, may wish students to critically assess current practice in order to innovate for change. Whilst participants were careful to recognise that individual experiences from practice may vary, they believed in modelling good practice for their students. As may be expected, many participants relayed their tendency towards scenario-based teaching; encouraging students to imagine what they would do in particular practice situations. In a similar vein, participants also recognised the importance of stories to encourage students to consider how theory and research affects real clients. A participant from the Law subject group reflected on this:

> Rather than them thinking about writing an academic essay about this provision or this particular Act, I try to encourage them to think about how that provision affects a real person and what the impact is going to be on this real person and on their legal case. […] If they put their client or their pretend client at the heart of what they're doing, then they'll approach things; their research, their communication – written and verbal, in a completely different way I think. (FG4)

Congruent with Wilson's (2015) findings, these accounts reveal that participants considered their ability to convey strong professional values, alongside practical and problem-based learning, as one of their strengths as pracademics. Other participants were similarly positive about the impact that practical application of theory may have on student understanding. There was a perception that this ability to share their experiences was a particular strength of pracademics, informing their teaching and encouraging students to make better-informed judgements about career aspirations, to the extent that, 'if you hadn't worked in practice it might be harder to make some of those analogies.' (FG1)

When asked specifically about what makes pracademics unique, one participant reflected that it was:

> Just the storytelling element, "this one time when I-" but also, I think that [students] don't believe us sometimes that things happen, so it's trying to make them aware that in the real world weird stuff does happen and they might need to deal with it, so they need to be prepared for it and also perhaps understand some of the theoretical stuff behind why that might be happening (FG2).

It is the use of the word 'perhaps' here which may demonstrate the participant's views on the prominence of practical skills over theory. However, one participant was mindful of how the utilisation of stories in teaching may be viewed by their career academic colleagues:

> I used to think that was sort of cheating, that I should be doing something more academic. Then you realise the power of stories really. (FG4)

These accounts reflect Boyd and Harris' (2010) conclusions about new lecturers' professional identities, the participants above are seeking to emphasise their strengths by conveying stories and

experiences. It is interesting to note the use of the word 'cheating'. This has connotations of illegitimacy whilst at the same conveying a benefit for the 'cheater' in illustrating a certain level of professional experience and competence to students. The participant also places this reflection in the past tense ('used to'), highlighting how their perceptions may have changed over time as they perhaps become more confident in their 'pracademic' identity.

The findings also revealed participants' awareness of the potential wider impact of their practitioner experience, for example through facilitating 'guest speaker and networking events' (FG1, FG4) and instilling transferable skills which included: 'the importance of teamwork' (FG5), critical analysis (FG1), time management (FG3), client/customer relationship management (FG2, FG5), and 'attention to detail' (FG5).

Participants also disclosed their need to encourage student autonomy and problem-solving skills in order to prepare their students for the workplace, reinforcing Wilson's (2015) findings.

Finally, considering their motivations for making their career transitions into academia, participants recalled being driven to make an impact on their professions by teaching the professionals of the future. Participants reported using their practice backgrounds to encourage students to recognise how they could make a positive impact. Many participants were very pragmatic about the realities of practice, but were still keen to instil a passion for their subject or vocation.

Weaving these strands together, they collectively demonstrate how pracademics draw on their practitioner experience in developing innovative teaching and learning practices, and providing student support. These findings evidence pracademics' perceptions of their impact in the HEI-context but more than that, they consistently reveal a shared determination to support the workforce of the future in developing skills and considering professional values in their vocational area.

Professional identities: 'Accidental Academic'

This second theme reveals participants' perceptions of their professional identities. This includes the influence of their experiences and the varied audiences with whom they engage.

In considering their own professional identities, a common-denominating topic was the extent to which participants perceived the differences between practice and academia, and how practice constituted the 'real-world' when compared to academia. Related to this, some participants derived confidence from their practitioner background because they felt that their ability to convey their experiences gave them authority with their students. This confidence was heightened for those who still engaged in practice alongside teaching.

> I will echo [the previous point] about [maintaining] that link with practice because that gives a little bit more of that authority that you're still in practice […] you know a bit more on the ground what is still happening. (FG6)

The findings revealed how much participants valued recognition of their practitioner knowledge. Reflecting the nature of the case-study institution, a number of participants worked in departments where every member of academic staff had been former practitioners.

> Journalism is a very practical subject which you […] can learn through teaching but it's one you really learn through doing and being in that environment, being a journalist. So that's why I've been a practitioner previously […] I would say essential for that job. I think everyone in our department has been a practitioner. (FG5)

This example presents a strong, validated academic self based on a clear idea of how practitioner experience is the norm. It also represents a different context to reflect on the existing literature (Pilcher et al. 2017; Forster et al. 2017; Tennant et al. 2015), which suggests that pracademics are at a disadvantage in a research-focussed environment.

Other participants conveyed the satisfaction that they gained from influencing future practitioners.

> […] it's brilliant that most of the work that I do is about equipping people to be really good probation officers. (FG1)

As mentioned in the previous section, this reflects a value-based dimension to pracademic identity which is not currently reflected in the existing literature. Further to this, the quotation above suggests that participants derive satisfaction from tasks which are congruent with their values. Other participants described how direct industry experience could be perceived by potential students as advantageous at the HEI's open days. Participants simultaneously expressed concerns about ensuring the currency of such knowledge; describing how the continual changes in practice can result in a lack of belonging.

Conversely, participants' practitioner identities could be a source of insecurity in the wider HE context as they experience 'impostor phenomenon' (Clance and Imes 1978, 241). Some participants reported that they felt less like academics than 'lecturers' or 'teachers'.

> I think if this was a question more about where is your real identity, which it is, I would say it's within practice, right. But maybe that's because I'm new and that thought of being an imposter still and people in the room will say, right, over to academics […] It's a kind of- it's not me yet. (FG5)

There is some suggestion here of Posner's (2009) continuum where the positioning of the participant depends on the permanency of their role and the length of time that they spent within each discipline, although a few participants disclosed how they would never consider themselves to be academics. The quote also evidences the existence of the 'liminal states' identified by Wood, Farmer, and Goodall (2016, 230) of being between professional identities. Another participant used concerns about their currency of experience (mentioned above) to explain why they had become focussed on research since moving to an academic role from practice.

> I think the other shift [with regards to professional identity] is that the more research I do the more original knowledge I generate […] That to me feels personally the kind of academic that I would like to be. So I think my move away [from practice] is more to do with research. […] I still value my practice experience; I just don't want to be that person that keeps talking about back in the day […] Like you say, you lose touch. (FG1)

This comment resonates with Knights and Clarke's (2014, 343) 'aspirant' academic self where individuals, aware of the shelf-life of the currency of their practice experience, seek continued achievement in order to feel secure in their new professional identity. In addition to this temporal element, participants also expressed concerns about the lack of support available to enable them to make the transition from practice to academia.

> Participant A: I also felt like there was almost no induction, no transition, it was like falling off a cliff. (laughter)
> Participant B: Yes it did feel like that.
> Participant A: Oh here you are, right, you must know how to deliver a lecture and perform in a seminar, and I said, well why on earth would I know? (FG4)

The depth of this transition is clearly articulated in the participant's use of the simile 'like falling off a cliff,' and expresses perceptions of the challenges involved in entering academia where there is an expectation that the new recruit will know how to lecture or 'perform in a seminar.' The neatness of the metaphor of Posner's continuum (2009) or Wenger's multi-membership model (1998) does not appear to capture the reality of this person's experience. Participants believed that their employer had responsibilities to provide them with support to help address this painful transition.

In order to help conceptualise their professional identities, participants were asked to explain how they introduced themselves. The results demonstrated how some pracademics adapt their identities accordingly.

> You just kind of tailor it don't you. I mean I know I have some colleagues who […] come from a practitioner background and […] we kind of refer to ourselves as chameleons and we just adapt to whatever scenario that we're in. If you're at an academic conference, which is very theoretically-based, then you're an academic. But if you're in front of a group of students, who to be fair couldn't care if you've got a PhD or not, you're a practitioner because they want the real-world experience. (FG5)

The metaphor of the 'chameleon' expresses how professional identity is continually performed and adjusted. It presents the advantages of having practice experience and questions the utility of perceiving professional identity as a 'continuum' (Posner 2009) or a 'revolving door' (Murphy and Fulda 2011). Other participants suggested that a dichotomy of professional identities exists, within which they could either be an academic or a practitioner. There were also suggestions that pracademic identity was too complex to constitute a binary concept.

Participant: I wouldn't see myself as academic; I would see myself as a lecturer, but not a practitioner, but not quite an academic.
[Researcher: Why?]
Participant: Possibly because I haven't gone that extra mile. I haven't got a PhD or involved myself in research to the extent which I would see myself as an academic, […] but I don't see myself as a practitioner. That is the other side of the coin, because I think that the practice has moved on a lot since I was in it; it's changed a lot. I don't feel I belong there anymore, so I am kind of lecturer rather than practitioner really. (FG2)

This uncertainty about professional identity reflects Shreeve's (2010, 2011) five distinct identities and instances of 'moving across' where teaching becomes more prominent than practice. These concerns could be described as more 'existentialist' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 345) as the participant struggles to find a sense of belonging. Participants similarly noted that, although many were familiar with the term, they would not refer to themselves as 'pracademics'; one participant suggested that it sounded 'really elitist' and they 'didn't think that most people would understand it' (FG6). Another preferred to reflect on how they were 'creating [their] own kind of identity as an academic with a lot of practice experience' (FG1). Other participants favoured different expressions, including 'reflective practitioner' (FG1) or 'accidental academic' (FG3) which supports findings from Gourlay (2011) about restructuring values and personal subjectivities through fragmenting a professional identity rather than transitioning from practitioner to lecturer.

Several participants revealed perceptions about a range of professional identities between the practitioner and the academic. They indicated that factors including: the length of time spent in each profession, the accolades attained there, the currency of their professional registration or practising certificate, and the lapse of time since their practitioner experience, would influence their positioning and self-definition along that spectrum.

> I think coming from an NHS background, the professional identity of those individual professions is really strong. […] I couldn't deliver a treatment […] because I haven't done it in such a long time, but also, I still have to maintain the professional registration. (FG1)

> […] practice has moved on a lot since I was in it. I don't feel I belong there anymore, so I am kind of lecturer rather than practitioner really. Two years' time I might see myself as an academic, but not yet. (FG2)

Again, the pursuit of this 'illusive' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 352) academic self is implicit in the participant's comment. There was some praise for the HEI's developmental opportunities for cultivating teaching and research expertise (although it was noted that these could vary locally), and some enthusiasm for engaging with continuing professional development to make the career transition:

> […] if you want to become an academic [the University] will allow you to do that. (FG3)

This participant's account references previous findings in regard to both professional identities and career transitions. The participant clearly feels that 'becoming' an academic involves an investment of time and a conscious decision to engage in professional development. It also suggests that the identity of 'academic' in clearly defined within the community of practice. Finally, some participants reported perceptions of a divide between pracademics and career academics:

> You found [career academics] saying […] because I've got my doctorate, I'm being kind of dismissed […] because I'm not practice-based. Then you've got practice people who would say, I'm being dismissed because I'm not doing research. […] I find that conversation a little bit worrying in a way that we're creating this type of divide between one or the other (FG6).

Although this divide was reported across several focus groups, there was also a sense that encouraging collaboration between pracademics and academics would benefit the HEI and its students. This builds on Clark, Vardeman, and Barba's (2014) suggestion that this could mitigate insecure professional identities.

Overall, whilst there was some variation according to disciplinary background and/or the HEI's local management of career transitions, the findings suggest that pracademics believe in the importance of practice-informed teaching for its multiple benefits, but also recognise the challenges presented by their potentially multi-faceted identities. This second theme demonstrates heterogeneity in participants' perceptions of the effects of their career transitions on their professional identities. The findings evidence that participants experienced fluid identities which could manifest in insecurities or benefits depending on how they viewed themselves according to their audiences.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper makes its contribution to the literature through exploring the lived realities of 'pracademics' from a range of disciplines who currently teach in a post-1992 HEI. The two key themes revealed by the research; namely, practice-informed teaching and professional identity, were analysed against the backdrop presented by the integrated concepts of pracademia, academic selves and professional identity.

Drawing together the findings from the first theme of practice-informed teaching, participants described practice as constituting the 'real world', as opposed to academia. Their professional values and skills informed their approaches to teaching and pastoral care. This perspective signifies congruence between pracademics and wider HE policy and rhetoric (BIS 2016). It also links with the second theme of professional identity as pracademics seek security in their new working environments. The findings additionally highlight an awareness of the concept of students as consumers; the participants disclosing perceptions of the 'authority' that their practitioner experience bestows on them in the eyes of those students who are preparing for professional careers. Yet, far from taking the neoliberal stance that HE is designed to service the economy, many participants were motivated by their value-base, reporting their desire to encourage students to question practice in its current form and seek to be agents of change. Gourlay (2011) outlined how a mismatch of professional values at HEIs can be alienating for pracademics. This research demonstrates how values can strengthen and pervade practice-informed teaching, where pracademics continue to view theoretical concepts in terms of how they may impact clients, and encourage their students to do the same.

In terms of the paper's second theme of professional identity, the findings reinforce the liminal states that have previously been identified by Shreeve (2010), Gourlay (2011) and Wood, Farmer, and Goodall (2016). Rather than evidencing a progression from one stable professional identity to another, the findings illuminate the messiness of transitions between practice and academia. Participants' conceptualisations of their professional identity reflect Murphy and Fulda's characterisation of career transitions to HE as a 'revolving door' (2011, 279), rather than Posner's (2009) continuum. The study develops existing understandings by generating insights as to how participants used this fluid conceptualisation of identity to their advantage, adapting it according to the audience and situation.

Some participants' fluctuating conceptions of professional identity, revealed by their self-descriptions as 'chameleons' or 'shapeshifters', challenge the dichotomous typologies introduced by Shreeve (2010) and accepted by Wood, Farmer, and Goodall (2016). Reflecting Boyd and Harris' research (2010) and reinforcing the notion of pracademics' context-dependent liquid identities, participants disclosed how they regularly tailored their identities according to their perceptions of their audience's expectations. Identifying their reluctance to perceive themselves as academics, some participants suggested that they felt overwhelmed when speaking to colleagues who had achieved PhDs. Others revealed perceptions of insecurity about their practice knowledge due to changes in the field. In their bids to address such issues, some participants divulged how they would create and perform

alternative identities and self-referents, which included the aforementioned terms of the 'accidental academic' and the 'reflective practitioner'.

The idea of the 'reflective practitioner' was a recurring theme throughout the focus groups. Although the specific term was coined by one participant, several participants noted how they were motivated to understand more about their practice and explore this through their own and/or others' research with the aim of influencing change and development within practice. This influence manifested in several ways; through teaching students as the 'next generation' of critical, reflective and value-led practitioners and by viewing theoretical concepts through the lens of practitioner experience in order to scrutinise the gap between research and practice.

Further to this, many participants identified tensions between the 'pracademic' and 'career academic' experiences. This reflects the literature which notes how perceived differences between career academics and pracademics can constitute a barrier to sharing skills and knowledge (Willis 2016). During the exploration of professional labels, participants tended to associate the term 'academic' with the career academic. This led to a repurposing of these terms to better reflect their experience. The 'accidental academic' term, coined by one participant, reflects a wider feeling amongst participants that, even if the transition to teaching in a HEI was deliberate and considered, the specific contribution of pracademics within their institution should be acknowledged as distinct. As might be expected, participants who were active researchers or who had completed PhDs were more comfortable with the academic label, which offers further evidence of the liminality of participants' professional identities.

It was also clear that some participants wanted to counteract what Shreeve (2010) describes as 'moving across' which occurs when there is an asymmetrical relationship between practice and teaching and a focus on teaching. Participants revealed desires to maintain their links with the 'real world' and preserve the currency of their knowledge. Some participants alluded to their strategies for achieving this; for example, using periods of self-managed time through their employment contracts to reconnect with their practice. The research suggests that HEIs should consider such needs when making decisions about their recruitment strategies and professional development programmes. Such initiatives could make provision for pracademics to spend time in their former practice settings for the mutual benefit of the individual, the practice organisation, and the HEI.

Drawing together both of these themes of practice-informed teaching and professional identities, this discussion turns to the exploration of potential recommendations. The findings refer to the 'reflective practitioner' or 'accidental academic' as particular types of pracademic. Further research could explore the use of labels such as this to generate a deeper understanding of the underpinning rationale behind their use and the associated perceptions with professional identity through pracademics' career transitions.

The authors advocate that academics with practice backgrounds are an important asset of HEIs, particularly in terms of their ability to facilitate the student experience through drawing on their practitioner knowledge and networks. HEIs should resist the preference, as reported in the literature review, to recruit career academics in order to maximise research income and instead focus on drawing together colleagues with multiple expertise to make a positive impact on the learning environment.

In terms of continuing professional development programmes, Wenger's (1998) nexus of multimembership, recommends secondments to maintain the currency of pracademics' practitioner knowledge and experience. Clark, Vardeman, and Barba (2014), Leonhardt, Bechtoldt, and Rohrmann (2017) and Laursen (2008), suggest initiatives including the creation of pracademic-driven communities of practice. Building on these ideas, the authors advocate the need for HEIs to invest in further empirical research to explore opportunities for HEI induction and professional development programmes to respond to the challenges faced by pracademics. Such research could also adopt a comparative approach to examine the interactions between such programmes and pracademics' career transitions at other types of HEI, and across other countries.

Drawing these strands together, the authors identify the potential for HEIs to develop empirically-informed recruitment strategies, induction programmes and professional development opportunities. Nurturing pracademics' practice-informed teaching, professional values, networks and identities could realise myriad benefits for the individual, the student experience and the HEI.

Note

1. Post-1992 refers to HEIs in the United Kingdom who were granted university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This includes both former polytechnic colleges and institutions created since 1992.

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