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Published version

GRIFFITHS, Teri-Lisa and DICKINSON, Jill (2023). Collaboration in a Liminal Space: Pracademia. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 11 (3), 167-171.

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Collaboration in a Liminal Space: Pracademia

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Abstract

In the context of contemporary policy development in higher education, which focusses on student outcomes as a central measure of success, the recruitment of academic staff has diversified in response. The authors explore the insights, experience, knowledge, and skills that academics with either former or current practitioner experience ('pracademics' or second-career academics) can bring to this setting that can complement those of existing faculty. Drawing on findings from empirical, theoretical, and reflexive research, and experiences of developing associated research-informed communities of practice, the authors consider increasing debates around pracademia, the value of labels, the liminal spaces that pracademics occupy, and the potential roles of this group within wider policy agendas. In doing so, we outline the next stages for this research programme.

Key words:

liminal space; pracademics; community of practice; higher education policy, career transitions

Introduction:

The concepts of 'pracademia' and 'pracademic' have been attracting growing interest in the context of contemporary policy developments across the Higher Education (HE) sector (Hollweck et al., 2021). Yet, perspectives vary about the value of these terms (see, for example, Eacott, 2020; Marcus, 2023; Hodgson and Garner, 2023). Concerns include the creation of a false dichotomy of career academics and pracademics, the currency of pracademics' industry knowledge following their transition to HE, and that the terms perpetuate unnecessary divides between academics. Other critiques are that the term is 'elitist' (Dickinson et al., 2020) and overly concerned with legitimising practice-generated knowledge within academia. However, pracademics, academics who have alternate professional backgrounds, are a growing group within an expanded HE sector. Pracademics also report distinct experiences around making the transition to HE and the perceived value of practical knowledge by the different stakeholders within the HE space (for example, practitioner experience can be valued by students but it is of less consequence for academic career progression). Therefore, further consideration of this group is a legitimate inquiry, as it is with any group which exists within the profession (for example, early career academics, academic returners, and associate lecturers). Furthermore, the shifting boundaries of academia and the impact on academic professional identities is an established discussion point (Henkel, 2009).

Pracademics and contemporary policy development in the UK

Whilst we both identify ourselves as 'pracademics' (one of us was previously a careers advisor and the other is a former solicitor) (Posner, 2009), it is important to acknowledge that

many terms are used to describe academics from professional backgrounds, including 'dual professional' and 'practice-based academic' (Kitchener, 2021, para. 2) and second career academics (LaRocco and Bruns, 2006). The literature also explores the different terms that pracademics employ to introduce themselves, depending on their audience (Dickinson et al., 2020). Whatever the assigned designation, this collective can find themselves at the forefront of tensions around the purpose of universities, where policy changes have led to an increased focus on student outcomes and attacks on some disciplines (The Guardian, 2022). Employability and applied learning have influenced HE practice for over 20 years (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Cadet & Griffiths, 2023). Recently, the UK Government has strengthened their rhetoric on so-called 'rip-off university degrees', with the current Prime Minister emphasising the 'prospect of a decent job' as the central metric of success (Department of Education, 2023). This is coupled with significant reductions in Government funding for humanities courses because they do not support 'specific labour market needs' (Office for Students, 2021), despite the arts and culture industry contributing £10.8 billion to the economy in 2016 (Arts Council England, 2019). Pracademia can be perceived as reinforcing these tensions due to perceptions that applied learning is focussed on transmitting sector and professional knowledge. Whilst pracademics might see their practitioner knowledge and experience as a strength, particularly with students, there is evidence that pracademics are motivated to shape the future of their previous professions, and encourage critical examinations of current practice, rather than engage in simple knowledge transmission (Dickinson et al., 2020). This interrogative approach corresponds with concepts of universities as institutions for the public good (Collini, 2012).

HE institutions are also now subject to pressures of marketisation, including metrics and performance tables. Leaders are considering how they can operationalise their workforce to meet these challenges. As research impact adopts a more prominent position within the next Research Excellence Framework (UKRI, 2023), there is potential for institutions to identify opportunities for HE-industry research that demonstrates impact for mutual benefit. Similarly, pracademics can support institutional aspirations within the Teaching Excellence Framework; for example, through co-designing opportunities for students that directly relate, and respond, to real-world challenges.

Exploring the possibilities of the liminal space

Within the scholarship of pracademia, the concept of liminal spaces considers the contribution of pracademics within the academy. Purported benefits of being in-between the worlds of practice and academia include abilities to challenge accepted practices and bring together theory and practice via praxis (Friesen, 2022), and operate as 'balanced enquirer[s]' who are motivated to view practice through a theoretical lens and test theory in the field (Panda, 2014, p. 152). As Hodgson (2023) points out, moving between practice and academia can also present challenges; for example, unrealistic expectations of teaching practice and feelings of imposter syndrome. Moving from practice into academia, one of us particularly recalls facing multiple, competing demands around achieving a doctorate, publishing research, and being returned in the Research Excellence Framework, alongside studying for a teaching qualification, taking on module and course leadership, and becoming an academic personal tutor. Recognised for their practitioner experience, they were tasked with developing simulation modules and drew on their contacts from practice to help further ensure an authentic learning experience.

Our research established pracademics as a diverse group with interdisciplinary commonalities around experiences of transitioning to HE and acculturation to academic professional identities. We revealed how pracademics employ their skills, knowledge, and experiences from practice in engaging students, and how pracademics retain professional values in academia. For one of us, the experience of previous practice, working with young people not in education, employment, or training, still influences their current practice through an understanding of the varied dynamics that influence people in their progression. This is something that they consider when offering person-centred pastoral support for students and during in-class conversations with students about rehabilitation and the human potential for change. In our initial paper (Dickinson et al., 2020), we made a number of recommendations; in particular, a call for HE institutions to recognise the important role that pracademics can play in shaping the student experience and to support the development of pracademic-led communities of practice.

In response to these findings, we developed a community of practice in our own institution to support pracademics' with their professional development. Recognising the benefits of driving forward change from the bottom up (Rousseau and Hove, 2022), and keen to avoid perpetuating any dichotomy between pracademics and those academics who had taken a more traditional career route, we co-engaged colleagues from the outset in devising a programme of activities. Professional development topics included getting published and sharing practice around teaching and learning. We also facilitated a workshop in collaboration with the Human Resources and Organisational Development team to inform the development of the university's new Academic Careers Framework that identified a range of indicators for career progression and regrading, including practitioner experience. From there, we secured funding to launch an annual Connecting with Professional Practice Conference and associated seedcorn funding stream to support the development of networks and collaborations between academia and industry around teaching and learning, research, professional development, and employability. Through these initiatives, we acknowledged and respected the multiple demands on academics' time by developing semi-structured sessions with pre-identified aims.

Externally, we also set up an international community of practice in collaboration with Advance HE as part of their Connect platform (Dickinson et al., 2020). Recently, we have co-edited a multidisciplinary, edited collection, involving 29 contributors. Published earlier this year, our book draws on combined theoretical, empirical, and reflective approaches to explore three key themes: pracademic identities, professional development, and teaching practice (Dickinson and Griffiths, 2023). Through the exploration of the experiences of pracademics, as they navigate their career transitions from practice and develop their career in academia, the collection of works highlights the valuable role that they can play alongside those who have taken more traditional academic career paths.

Our findings have uncovered potential avenues for future research. These include exploring:

- pracademics' experiences of the liminal spaces that they occupy, and the perceived impact(s) on their development;
- pracademics' perceptions of, and engagement in, research, and some of the facilitators and barriers in navigating their research journeys.

In practice, the impact of this work is designed to encourage meaningful conversations around the role(s) that pracademics occupy as part of a diverse faculty.

Through our research, we have seen increased debate around the value of pracademia, and varied perceptions around labelling those who have dual practitioner and academic experience in this way. In addition, whilst there seems to be a renewed government and institutional focus on employability, we perceive the potential for wider discussion around the pracademic's role. Our driver for the research has been to champion pracademics alongside colleagues who have taken more traditional academic career paths and develop understandings around the complementary roles that they could play. As we suspect that the debates around pracademia will continue, we make a call for further theoretical, empirical, and reflexive research and the development of communities of practice to help drive conversations forward and underpin evidence-informed decision-making.

Biographies

Teri-Lisa Griffiths is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology. She is a founding member of both Hallam Pracademia and the Advance HE Connect Pracademia Networks. Her research explores where and how spaces of personal and professional development emerge both on and off campus.

Dr Jill Dickinson is a Reader of Law at Leeds Beckett University. A former Solicitor, Jill is an SFHEA and has been shortlisted for National Teaching Fellowship, and appointed as a Reviewer for the Advance HE Global Teaching Excellence Awards. Her research focuses on place-making and professional development.

Advance HE Connect Pracademia community of practice: <https://connect.advance-he.ac.uk/topics/16122/feed>

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