

Some academics are seen as more proper than others.

How should we discuss the role and significance of academics with practical experience? Jill Dickinson, Teri-lisa Griffiths, Monika Foster and Steve Johnson take the debate on “pracademics” further

The phenomenon of the “pracademic” - academics with professional practice experience - has received considerable attention in recent months.

A [Washington Post article](#), with the aim of introducing the term to a wider audience, praised the contribution of academics with experience of practice.

And the article stimulated a [Wonkhe article](#) that questioned the value of labelling colleagues in this way:

“The label itself could potentially lead to – or indeed add to – divisiveness and hierarchy in the academy... This separation implies an oversimplified dichotomy that could undermine the legitimacy of “traditional academics” and contribute to an unhealthy competition, rather than fostering collaboration and mutual respect.

The argument was that labels such as “pracademic” can be divisive and unhelpful. Yet similar arguments are rarely made about categories that refer to colleagues' gender, ethnicity, sexuality, career stage, (dis)ability or many other characteristics that make up the incredibly diverse world of academia - like [“early career researchers”](#), [“black professors”](#), or [“disabled academics”](#).)

Just like other labels, the term “pracademic” is not universally recognised as being helpful - some of the critiques levelled against the term include that it is [“elitist”](#) and [“highbrow”](#).

But there is no doubt that it is a clear way of describing a distinct group of academics, who share similar experiences related to their transition and acculturation into academia.

It is commonplace and perfectly legitimate, in our view, to celebrate the diverse contributions made by our community - while acknowledging the barriers faced by many of our colleagues - and this is precisely our argument in relation to pracademia.

A useful categorisation

In a [volume](#) edited by two of the current authors, 29 contributors - many of whom identify personally with the term “pracademic” - recount a wide range of experiences and put forward many helpful proposals to address issues faced by colleagues whose career trajectories are not “traditional” or linear.

Some examples from the volume include the following:

- [Mark Ellis](#) shares that after an initial period of being anxious to convey theory to his students in line with his “established scholarly colleagues [...] what soon became apparent within my teaching was the value of analogies built from my experiences”.
- [Helen Taylor](#) advocates for pracademics to engage with professional networks beyond the academy to “enable them to recognise the multiple elements of their identity as positive”.

- In her chapter, which reports on research with pracademics, [Funmi Obembe](#) notes how many universities do not acknowledge previous professional experience during academic recruitment or through progression pathways. She calls for universities to expand the diversity of their career progression pathways.

The overwhelming message is that “pracademic” is a useful category to describe a variety of experiences, with the common feature being the challenges faced by those who do not possess the qualifications, or have not begun to develop a profile, expected of the “proper” academic - doctoral qualifications, publications, research grants, PhD supervision experience, teaching qualifications and so on.

This can lead to disillusionment, limited career progression and - most significantly - systematic undervaluing of the contribution to research, teaching and engagement of this key group of colleagues.

At the same time, universities wish to demonstrate their societal impact, and collaboration with, and contribution to, industry is one of the ways they can achieve this. The high-quality research and inquiry which inform programmes of study, and the impact of this research, are celebrated in the literature and [national awards](#).

Rather than shutting the door or self-limiting their academic progression, pracademics are advocating for universities to make room for diverse expertise.

It can of course be unhelpful to assign an umbrella label to a diverse group of colleagues, and we certainly do not set out to make value judgements about the positives and negatives of “pracademia”, and we should welcome the amazing diversity of our colleagues.

But we should question the idea that discussing the role and significance of pracademics is somehow divisive in a way that might downplay the role of “proper” academics.

Developing a truly [“porous” academy](#) - and reaping, re-appraising, and re-applying its benefits for research and teaching - requires that current barriers to making [“room for everyone’s talents”](#) be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Author bios

Jill Dickinson is Reader in Law at Leeds Beckett University and co-editor (with Teri-lisa Griffiths) of *Professional Development for Practitioners in Academia*, Springer, 2023. Jill is a former Solicitor who specialised in commercial property.

Teri-lisa Griffiths is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University. A former careers adviser, her teaching and research are focussed on professional development, in particular how atypical spaces support emergent learning and development.

Monika Foster is Professor of Business Education at Northumbria University. Having worked in industry herself, Monika now leads a Department of Marketing, Operations and Systems and is interested in the development of colleagues, many of whom bring a wealth of industry experience.

Steve Johnson is Professor of Business and Innovation at Leeds Trinity University. He specialises in entrepreneurship and embeds his experience of starting and running a small business in his teaching, research and policy advice work.