

## **Meaning and purpose in academic work: implications for early career academics (0169)**

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Since the 1990s there has been an exponential increase in numbers of PhD candidates and contract research staff without an equivalent rise in academic positions available. An analysis of the experiences of these three groups of early career academics -- doctoral students, postdoctoral research staff and newly appointed academics -- (McAlpine and Åkerlind, in press) shows the following employment realities for new and intending academics:

- Many will experience only short-term academic careers, ending with their PhD, a postdoc research position, or first academic appointment.
- Others may find themselves in academia long-term, but through holding a succession of contracts rather than a permanent appointment.
- Meanwhile, those who do achieve academic permanency may be disenfranchised by the high stress environment and competing demands they face as academics.

Uncertain employment prospects are aggravated by increasing variability in types of academic positions, and the frequent lack of a clear path through academia. Current routes to academic careers are diverse. Recent literature reports people moving in and out of academia, sometimes in counterintuitive ways, before finding a long-term 'home'. For instance, those who achieve a short-term academic appointment immediately following their Ph.D. or postdoc may fail to find a long-term position, while others who initially take an appointment outside of academia may end up returning (e.g., Vitae, 2009).

Despite the pessimistic prognosis for many early career academics, traditional academic careers are still held up as the default long-term goal for PhDs and postdocs, which can unnecessarily limit ways of thinking about academic careers. Attempts to ameliorate the situation commonly focus on either (a) providing academic skills training for PhDs and postdocs to increase competitiveness for academic positions; or (b) providing career information and additional skills training to increase options for careers outside academia (as with the UK's UKGRAD programme and subsequent Vitae initiative). The problem with the first strategy is that, without an increase in total numbers of positions available, this approach simply advantages some academic hopefuls at the expense of others. The problem with the second strategy is the extent to which non-academic career outcomes are inevitably positioned within an academic environment as a less successful career outcome (Åkerlind, 2005). This may then be demoralizing for PhDs and postdocs who don't move directly into academic positions.

Whilst there are no easy solutions, a different way of thinking about the situation is needed. One option explored in this paper is to reduce the demoralisation and sense of wasted effort often associated with failure to achieve a continuing academic appointment by building ways of publicly and personally valuing short-term careers in academia. This means acknowledging that people in early career roles can make valuable academic and social contributions, even if they are not engaged in academic work long-term.

Another option is to reframe 'career' in relation to personal progress and contribution rather than in relation to a achieving a particular position or title. In other words, long-term professional progression could be conceived as following a personal intellectual agenda over time, which could focus on personal growth and social and intellectual contributions, rather than permanence and status. Current debates about academic work tend to be focused on academic activities, expectations and outcomes. In this paper we argue that the attention placed on these more external features of academic work needs to be balanced by greater attention to personal and subjective features, ie the meaning and purpose that academic activities hold for those engaged in them.

A focus on personal meaning and purpose directs attention away from the positions that an individual holds and more towards the varied and situated ways in which individuals develop a sense of who they are and what they want to become. Such variation is rooted in unique past experiences, day-to-day activities and interactions, emotional responses to present opportunities and challenges, as well as past, present and future hopes and intentions. This is what most contributes to a sense of academic purpose, meaning and identity.

Attention to meaning and purpose can also play an integrative role in increasingly varied careers that may consist of a series of short-term appointments, stops and starts, or circuitous routes. It can facilitate a sense of coherence across the routes and detours that may be taken within academia and also between the often competing activities, demands and pressures individuals face as academics. Further, a focus on personal meaning and coherence highlights how early career academics can be their own agents of learning and change as they engage in and prepare for their futures.

This paper explores the significance of meaning, purpose and identity in academic work, and discusses ways in which explicit attention to academic purpose may be added to early career mentoring and academic development programs to reduce the fragmenting impact of workload stress and career uncertainty.

## **References**

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