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Keynote Address

Tribal Identities and *Tribal Reservations*

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This conference tackles the important question of “What is Higher Education for?” and “What are HE researchers for?” My paper will focus on one aspect of the debate: how the roles and identities of academics and researchers have changed, and continue to change, within a rapidly changing environment characterised by supercomplexity and – arguably - ‘epistemological pandemonium’ (Barnett, 2000). I will explore ideas from a recent book on academic tribes (Trowler, Saunders and Bamber, 2012), which updates a subject initially dealt with by Tony Becher in 1989, and revisited by Becher and Trowler in 2001.

The original book’s main thesis was that our subject discipline defines us, and identifies us as members of academic ‘tribes’. But in modern universities—unlike in tribes—change is ubiquitous, so we have to ask whether the tribes metaphor still has value. Do tribal members share a coherent set of practices, values and standard approaches to activities like teaching and research? Or are our identities affected by the drivers and influences we are all too aware of, such as interdisciplinary working, accountability, and the intensification of academic labour – to name just a few? I will give examples from a range of disciplines and countries. And I will ask you to think about questions such as:

- Do academics and researchers have identities such as ‘historian’ or ‘biologist’ or ‘engineer’ running through our bones like the lettering in a stick of seaside rock?
- What are the other elements, apart from discipline, which influence our academic identities?
- Which communities are you part of? For example, do you have more common ground with academics across disciplines or within your own discipline?
- What does all this mean for you and your future as an academic or researcher within HE?

References

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- Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines (2nd edn)*. Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE.
- Becher, T. (1989) *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Trowler, P., Saunders, M. and Bamber, V. (2012) *Tribes and Territories in the 21st-century: Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*. International Studies in Higher Education. Routledge: London.