

Academia is competitive.

There's no point beating about the bush; I once read a plausible suggestion that the reason why Scott Peck's best-selling book, *The road less traveled*, has been such an enormous success is that it begins with a short, sharp, uncompromising statement that everyone recognises as true: 'Life is difficult'. So, hoping for similar success, I repeat, with a little elaboration this time: *in the UK, academia is a highly competitive environment*.

If, as a newer researcher, you've not yet grasped *how* competitive it is, you will do so just as soon as you receive your first rejection...and then your second, and third... and countless more. These may be rejections of article submissions, or research funding applications, or scholarship applications, or job or post-doc applications – according to the *Times Higher Education*, up to 200 applicants can often end up chasing every desirable early career post¹. If you pursue a career in academia you need to get used to rejection; it will shadow you throughout your career, becoming a pervasive feature of life that you accept and assimilate as part and parcel of what it is to be an academic.

So, how do you deal with this?

You can considerably reduce the number of rejections you receive by adopting either of two effective strategies. Strategy 1- which we could call the *low-risk, low-gain, or the keeping-your-head-down-and-subsisting-in-the-margins-of-academia* strategy - operates on precisely opposite lines to the 'in it to win it' principle. Strategy 1 is really a case of: 'if you don't put in, you can't be knocked back'. It involves writing very little for publication – or, as an alternative, writing any old rubbish that will be accepted, without revisions, by the latest pop-up, open access, online-only journal that no-one has heard of, and whose editor has sent you (and a thousand other people) an email asking you to contribute to it. It also involves submitting no research funding applications in your own name, and, above all – for those who have managed to secure a permanent academic post - staying put until retirement and avoiding applying elsewhere. It's possible that many academics adopt this strategy – but, of course, we've never heard of any of them.

If Strategy 1 doesn't appeal to you, you could try Strategy 2: the *making-yourself-stand-out-from-the-crowd*, or the *giving yourself the edge* strategy. Whilst it certainly won't *eliminate* rejections from your academic career, it is likely to *reduce* them.

So, how does it work? As a newer researcher of higher education, how do you go about making yourself stand out from the crowd?

Essentially, it all comes down to professionalism – or *professionality*. It was Professor Eric Hoyle (now retired from Bristol University) who first introduced the term 'professionality' into the lexicon of educational studies and research, distinguishing it from 'professionalism' on the basis that *professionality* refers to the knowledge, skills and procedures which people use in their work, whereas *professionalism* refers to status-related elements of an occupation (Hoyle, 1975). Trying to add clarity to his earlier work, he was later to explain *professionality* as 'the service component of professionalism' (Hoyle, 2008). In practice (even amongst Hoyle's 'followers'), the two terms tend to become conflated, particularly since the meaning

¹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hundreds-of-phd-students-chasing-every-early-career-post/2016799.article>

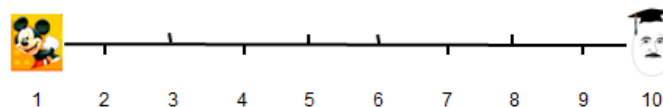
of professionalism has evolved considerably within the sociology of professions over the last decade or two. Hoyle's focus for this, his early, work was schoolteachers, and he developed two heuristic models of what – at the time of writing, in the 1970s – he presented as illustrative of the two extremes of the range of professionalities prevalent within the teaching profession. He called these 'restricted' and 'extended' professionalism models:

The 'restricted' professional is characterised by...	The 'extended' professional is characterised by ...
skills derived from experience	skills derived from a mediation between experience & theory
perspective limited to the immediate in time and place	perspective embracing the broader social context of education
introspective with regard to methods	methods compared with those of colleagues and reports of practice
value placed on autonomy	value placed on professional collaboration
infrequent reading of professional literature	regular reading of professional literature
teaching seen as an intuitive activity.	teaching seen as a rational activity.

(Hoyle, 1975, p. 318)

To me, Hoyle's key achievement in formulating these models was to highlight the wide range of professionalism that exists in *any* occupational or professional group. So, what might be the characteristics of a 'restricted' researcher/academic of higher education? And what might an 'extended' researcher look like, professionally? And if you imagine these two sets of typical characteristics as the two ends of an 'extended' - 'restricted' researcher professionalism continuum, where on the continuum would you locate yourself?

The 'Restricted'-'Extended' Researcher Continuum



Would you position yourself mid-way between the two extremes, or very close to one of them? And where would you locate your peers? Do you consider yourself more or less 'extended' than them? And where do you lie, compared to some of the experienced, senior academics whose work you read?

Note that Hoyle's original models incorporate consideration not only of what people *do*. A 'restricted' researcher of higher education therefore wouldn't *simply* be someone who follows strategy 1 (above) - someone who mainly or habitually produces what may be categorised as low-grade or low quality writing that is descriptive only, lacks an analytical dimension and fails to incorporate theoretical perspectives. A researcher's 'restricted' professionalism would also be determined by her/his attitudes, values, perspectives, perceptions, and intellectuality. In fact, I have defined professionalism as a *stance*, rather than as a simple mode - or code - of behaviour (Evans, 2002).

Whilst they may not have used Hoyle's specific terminology, many critics and analysts of educational research quality have implicitly identified characteristics of 'restricted' (and, in some cases, 'extended') professionalism amongst researchers. The late Donald McIntyre, for example, observed in his presidential address to the British Educational Research Association:

One thing I know from several decades of experience is that I find it very difficult to do educational research well. It requires rigorous thinking, perceptiveness, imagination, self-awareness, social skills and self-discipline in such demanding combinations that I am usually disappointed with the quality of my own work. *To judge from the many papers that I have to referee for research journals, other researchers find it difficult to do well, and many seem to lack an understanding of the diverse basic disciplines required.* (McIntyre, 1997, p. 129, emphasis added)

As one who has also been a critic of the quality of educational research broadly (Evans, 2002) - including some higher education-focused research - I share McIntyre's concern. To me, a researcher who is an 'extended' professional would typically, *inter alia*: conduct highly rigorous research; generate and develop theory from her/his findings; strive constantly to apply deep levels of analysis to her/his research data; frequently reflect upon and revisit and refine his/her own studies; and apply effective criticism to the formulation of his/her arguments.

To newer researchers this may appear a daunting list upon which to set one's sights. But no one expects you to be able to tick off every item on it by next week - you have the length of your entire career to spend on extending your professionalism: moving along the professionalism continuum. I'm still inching my way along it!

My own journey from 'restricted' towards 'extended' professionalism has involved minding my Ps and Qs. Minding one's Ps and Qs has come to be used colloquially to mean being on one's best behaviour, but in researching the origins of the expression I came across a cartoon (<http://dictionaryblog.cambridge.org/2012/04/17/mind-your-ps-and-qs/>) depicting a conversation between a master and an apprentice employed in a medieval printing press. The master berates the apprentice for typographical errors in the latest batch of printing, caused by mixing up the 'p' and the 'q' when typesetting. In his defence, the apprentice retorts that it's difficult to distinguish them when they have to be set back-to-front - and because they lie beside each other. In this scenario, minding one's Ps and Qs clearly means paying attention and exercising great care. So interpreted, it seems an excellent approach to strategy 2: making yourself stand out from the crowd.

How clearly defined are the key terms or concepts that feature in your research? Does/did your thesis include several pages devoted to in-depth analysis of the key 'thing' - the issue,

trend, attitude, practice, or whatever it is – that you are focusing on? If it does, you've probably made a good start in progressing along the professionalism continuum.

In my keynote address at the SRHE Newer Researchers' Conference, I shall present a few highlights from my own continuing, career-long, journey towards 'extended' professionalism with illustrations of specific Ps and Qs that I have incorporated into my research and scholarship. Two of the 'Qs' that I plan to address are *quality* and *quiddity*. The first is clearly fundamental to research that fosters international reputations and is indicative of a researcher who is considered 'scholarly' rather than merely 'competent'. The second – quiddity – is, in my view, essential to achieving the first. It is a little-known term that means the 'whatness' of something: what it is – its essence. So it's all about understanding precisely the core concept(s) that you are examining, and communicating that understanding clearly to others – hence, my question above about clearly defining and analysing your key terms and concepts.

As for the Ps, I shall use some of the many 'P' topics or issues that my work has focused on (such as: professionalism, professional development, professors, professorial leadership, and proximity theory) to illustrate briefly how I have gone about applying *precision* – a key 'P' word – and *quiddity*, in order to achieve the kind of *quality* that, on a good day, has helped me to question established approaches and knowledge, and pioneer new directions.

My aim in that keynote will be to whet your appetite for developing your research in ways that you may not have considered. Through sharing my experiences with you, I hope to spark off ideas that you will want to take on board as you make sure and steady progress towards 'extended' professionalism.

References

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