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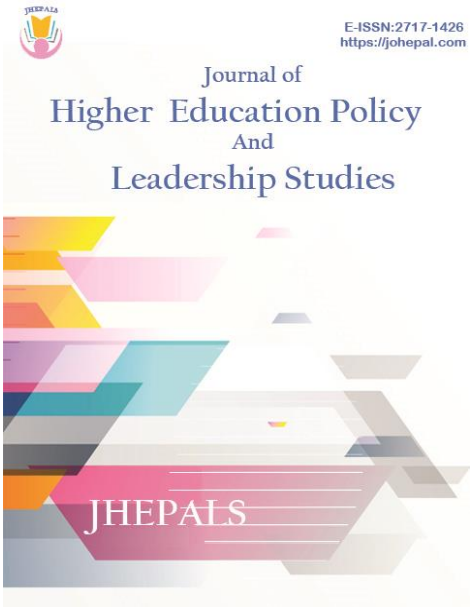
Pracademics in Remote Environments: Insights for Faculty Leadership



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Pracademics in Remote Environments: Insights for Faculty Leadership

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Abstract

The concept of a pracademic - an individual who straddles the world of practice and academia has a long history within higher education, and their contributions to student learning are significant (Clegg, 2008). However, the literature reports that creating a salient academic identity and generating a sense of meaningful work for these individuals can be a protracted and tricky process. Digitalisation in the academy, and reduced opportunities for engagement with traditional faculty due to post-pandemic hybrid and online working has exacerbated these challenges, as has finding meaning and value in roles with little direct contact with students (as is common in many digital universities). This paper examines the narratives of pracademics in a digital business school to examine these challenges, alongside considering how faculty leadership can better support them and their transition. Using an adapted version of Rothausen et al.'s (2017), framework for analysis of trajectories on staying or leaving an organisation, we employ narrative methods to analyse data from semi structured interviews with pracademics in a remote business faculty. Our findings offer valuable insights for leadership teams in the increasing number of faculties which employ pracademics working remotely.

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Keywords: Identity; Pracademic; Higher Education; Practitioners; Business; Remote Working; Meaning

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Introduction

The term 'pracademic' has, over the past 50 years, appeared across many disciplines to denote individuals who 'span both the ethereal world of academia as a scholar, and the pragmatic world of practice', (Panda, 2015, p, 150). The role has gained more attention of late through the marketisation of Higher Education (HE), (Maisuria & Cole, 2017) with the growing emphasis on graduate employability as the core aim of degree level study in which the student is interpellated as a consumer (Furedi, 2010). This has created one outcome of potential tensions between what universities believe good pedagogic practice offers and what 'employers might want or need' (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020, p. 293). One of the ways these links have been fostered is via recruitment of practitioners with credible industry and professional experience to academic roles. As Dickinson et al. (2022) report, this practice emphasises the link between industry/professional practice and academia, presenting universities as central to economic growth and prosperity. Business schools have often been at the forefront of such policy drivers (Nawaz et al., 2023).

This practitioner-academic role, often presented in portmanteau form as 'pracademic', is largely premised on an ideal of an effective practitioner who brings insights and networks from practice but can equally turn their hand to teaching and research (Owens, 2017; Panda, 2015). Evidence from the literature illustrates that these individuals are thought to be able to effect change to practice more readily, given their practitioner status (Collins & Collins, 2019).

The reality is not so straightforward, and literature in this area reports that pracademics often struggle to achieve an agentive and meaningful professional identity within HE and that this, in turn, affects their ability to perform well and influence practice, (Dickinson et al, 2022). Long-established tensions between theory and practice, 'those who do, and those who write about it' by Collins and Collins, (2019, p. 2) may generate synergies between business and academia, but may also cause conflict. Gulati (2007, p. 777) argues that, to underscore intellectual legitimacy of management research, management academics may attempt to marginalise colleagues who maintain close links with the world of practice. In the process, management academics separate themselves into 'two tribes on either side of a chasm' with the result identified as 'a brutal identity warfare within academia.' Such 'warfare' is played out against a backdrop of what has been termed 'the incestuous, closed loop of scholarship,' (Hambrick, 1994 as cited in Gulati, 2007, p. 15).

Potential costs of failure to find meaning and identity are high, with Wood et al. (2016) reporting on frequent tensions and insecurities for those caught between vocational expertise and academic credibility (Myers et al., 2025). As Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 114) point out, dissociation between learning, expertise and pedagogies 'opens the possibility of mismatch or conflict'. This holds true at the individual level where job satisfaction, sense of professionalism and personal and professional feelings of efficacy are at risk, and for the HE sector, where attrition and negative impact on the student experience are costs that the sector can ill afford to bear (Rothausen et al., 2017).

Pracademics in the Digital Business School

Business schools recruit individuals from a wide variety of professional backgrounds under an umbrella of providing applied business and management expertise; these might include

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former police officers/staff, social workers, legal professionals or entrepreneurs. These people bring demonstrable experience and 'knowhow' to the teaching of undergraduate and post graduate qualifications. However, they do not always stay. The reasons for this are complex but studies have reported that practitioners often find that the fast pace of real-world challenges in both business and public sector can seem far more exciting than the slower pace of academic research, the outputs of which are often contested by those from a practitioner background (Brans & Pattyn, 2017). For practitioners who lack formal research training in the form of doctoral studies, the challenges are even greater, as their understanding of what it means to be an academic are based solely on assumptions created prior to entering the field, assumptions that may bear little resemblance to reality (McCabe et al., 2016). In addition, the academic tenure process may prioritize research output over practical experience, leading practitioners to feel disconnected and undervalued (Dickinson et al., 2022). Although there has been some research into these challenges, it is largely located in campus-based universities, where relationship dynamics, both academic and staff/student, are very different (Hodgson, 2023).

While developing an academic identity in today's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is known to be challenging, due to the myriad demands placed on academic staff (Ryan et al., 2023), remote environments are recognised as particularly difficult when it comes to developing an academic identity (Hildebrandt & Couros, 2016). Those entering HEIs in which work is largely remote are deprived of many of the norms of academic identity building. These include informal conversations and meetings with colleagues, face-to face-interactions with students, aiding individual's understandings of the context and culture of their work (Engeness, 2021). Such elements all feature large in research into how academic identities are formed and shaped (Billot, 2010; Gardner & Willey, 2018). Post-covid, significant areas of teaching work have been carried out remotely. However, the transition to fully remote working has largely failed to factor in the anomie that individuals may feel when entering an environment where many of the factors that influence workplace identity formation are lacking. This remains an area less explored in the research literature.

As several researchers have pointed out, individuals that move from face-to-face to remote working environments, experience challenges that go beyond technology (Johnson, 2020). Making work meaningful in digital environments presents challenges for both individuals and their employers, yet it is vitally important in relation to organisational performance, (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Constructions around what might be defined as meaningful work are richly covered in the human resource literature, such as by Chalofsky (2003, p. 73) who describes 'an inclusive state of being that highlights the relationship between the individual and organisation.' However, these meanings are now being updated for digital and hybrid work contexts, where remote working points to a number of challenges for the individual, affecting feelings of 'inclusion, connectedness and purpose' (Byrd, 2022, p. 145). Byrd discusses the concepts of 'unity with others, identifying others with similar values, and being able to articulate values that emphasise action in the performance of work responsibilities and duties'.

Other useful recent interpretations come from Baily et al.'s (2019) extensive review of meaningful work which highlights work relationships as a fundamental feature, alongside Cullen (2013) who points out its significance in relation to career trajectory. In addition,

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recent qualitative research links the emotions generated by meaningful work closely to professional identities, values and sense of purpose (Byrd, 2022). However, more closely aligned to this topic, literature on pracademics indicates that the values inherent within work that is meaningful in an individual, may be difficult to enact when transferring from practice to academia (Eacott, 2022).

Introducing Rothausen et al. 's (2017) PTREAD Framework

This study takes the opportunity to build on work undertaken by Rothausen et al. (2017), adapting a framework initially employed to examine narratives of leaving or remaining in an organisation. We adapt and stretch their PTREAD framework to investigate whether practitioner academics (pracademics) create, (or are failing to create) salient identities and meaning within a UK based digital business school. We also utilise the framework to explore what institutional mechanisms and guidance from academic leaders and line managers pracademics feel would be helpful in supporting their successful (or not) transition, and whether they stay in role. By addressing a gap in the literature around retaining pracademics in remote environments, this paper offers a number of insights for education leaders in these settings.

We begin by outlining our theoretical approach, before explaining why we adopt a narrative study of these transitional identities. In our methods section, we outline our sample and approach to data collection and analysis. In our findings and discussion, we explore the very specific role of pracademics in academia and the identity work that they were/are engaged in, both on taking up their posts and as they embed within higher education. In the final section, we explore the implications of the work for both theory and practice.

Conceptual Framework

A Narrative Approach to Transitional Identities

Although there are various ways of approaching identity, contemporary identity research has witnessed a paradigm shift over the last 20 years, reflecting a move towards understanding identities as multiple along with the use of narrative approaches as a valuable methodological lens for researching transitional identities (Brown et al., 2015). By prioritizing personal narratives, researchers can elucidate the complex interplay of societal, cultural, and personal factors that shape identity (Rothausen et al., 2017). This approach has proven particularly effective for uncovering participants' lived experiences at work, enabling us to delve into the multifaceted nature of identity formation and re-formation (Yip et al., 2020), and providing a nuanced understanding of individual and collective identities, transcending conventional categorical frameworks. Thus, making it possible to gain insight into how identity work manifests during the course of individuals' daily practice (Brown et al., 2008).

This type of approach also aligns with postmodern and constructivist perspectives, challenging essentialist notions of identity by acknowledging their fluid and context-dependent nature (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) and moving on from historical assumptions of 'fairly stable' views of organisation, employment and conceptualisations of the self (Sveningson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). More recent theorisations are particularly pertinent

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in exploring marginalized identities and subverting hegemonic discourses (both areas of interest when it comes to pracademics and their feelings of agency and worth in an academic environment. Additionally, the narrative lens offers a means to uncover counter-narratives and amplify voices often marginalized in traditional identity research (Brown et al., 2015).

Drawing on key work in this area, we argue that a narrative approach provides a robust foundation for this genre of research; offering researchers a powerful tool to navigate intricate terrains of identity-work and fostering a more inclusive and authentic understanding of the diverse ways individuals construct and negotiate their sense of self. This approach also closely links to social identity theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which focuses how people categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Group affiliations influence behaviour and self-perception, leading to in-group favouritism and intergroup conflicts, such as those reported in the literature on pracademics (Braga, 2016; Panda, 2015).

Following work of other researchers who counter conceptualisations of a unified and stable identity, this study takes the view that identities are fragmented and socially constructed through language and discourse (Baxter, 2017; Collins et al., 2022) where individuals adopt multiple, fluid identities depending on the context. In in the sections which follow, we outline this theoretical approach based on ideas that affective-cognitive structures influence, and are influenced by, transitional identities and that this in turn, influences individuals' sense of agency or self-salience (Brown et al., 2015). This 'identity work' encompasses the active and intentional efforts individuals undertake to construct, maintain, and present their identities in social contexts (Brown et al., 2015; McLean & Price, 2019), in this case at work. It involves a dynamic process of aligning one's self-concept with societal expectations, norms, and roles, melding present identities with aspirational ones (Mackay, 2017).

Pracademics: Transitioning and Development

The contested and Janus-type role held by pracademics is identified by Volpe and Chandler (1999, p. 24) as 'faculty who are both scholars of conflict and its resolution as well as practitioners of conflict resolution in their own universities.' Posner (2009, p. 345) positions their role as 'hybrids or dual citizens' noting how they inhabit both academic and professional practice worlds, 'moving back and forth playing translation, coordination, and perspective alignment roles'.

However, a number of researchers see pracademics as instrumental in generating new knowledge and improving practice. Kolber and Heggart, (2022 p. 11) for example, explore their impact on practice, stating that pracademics have considerable power to effect changes through their position by saying, 'the things that no one else can-or no one else has thought of, including suggesting alternatives and new ideas, and by, connecting and integrating theory and practice'.

In another work, Lam (2021) argues that those transitioning from practice to academia can be riven by identity conflicts, yet can also productively and profoundly disrupt social boundaries, via resistance discourses that push back against prevailing organisational norms. Thus, their experiences can provoke change in organisational discourses. This is a

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key consideration for leaders who may not share the same background as the pracademic if they have had a long trajectory in academia (Myers et al., 2025).

A supportive organisational culture is thought to be vital for successful identity work. Herman et al. (2021) explore the experiences of health professionals transitioning into academia, focusing on those who experience an unsupportive or 'care-less' environment versus those who receive more support. In the case of the former, they argue that the redefining work necessary for transitioning may not occur. Wood et al. (2016) explore teaching experiences of pracademics, finding that in carrying out identity work, these individuals created productive resistance to institutional hegemonies.

Literature on identity work reports that it is often triggered by some element of threat (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). A practitioner taking up a position in academia, may encounter multiple threats to their former professional identity, affecting their sense of credibility, agency and ethical approach to their work. Although there is a great deal of work that illustrates that pracademics often struggle with changing identities and sense of salience, there is little research that examines how faculties might support those in the process of transitioning. The work of Ennals et al. (2016) employs an occupational lens to reveal identity confusion, regression to past role identities, and mixed perceptions about academia. They argue that these professionals find academic identities through teaching rather than research. Dickinson et al. (2022), support this finding. Their study of Australian pracademics concluded that the majority were committed to field-oriented practical education and resisted taking up researcher identities.

Much work in this area points to identity conflict of some sort, but there is little that suggests solutions, particularly on the part of faculty leadership. In many cases pracademics are inducted and supported in the same way as other member of staff, with little awareness or thought for their very particular backgrounds. Works by Campbell (2022) and Empson (2013) suggest some tactics for resolving identity conflict when arriving from practice, however, this places responsibility firmly upon on the practitioner to effect changes, not their line managers. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010, p. 44), discuss business schools as identity workspaces, places that, 'go beyond influencing what managers know and do, and support [s] them in understanding and shaping who they are.' However, their work stops short of specific suggestions that might aid this process. More recently, Chaaban et al. (2022) explored Arab pracademic identity renegotiations, concluding that faculty leadership has a key part to play, but were not specific in terms of how.

This study therefore exploits this gap in the research by specifically exploring what support may be needed from faculty leadership in order to effect this identity work and transition effectively.

Identity Work: A Narrative Approach

To examine identity work of pracademics, this study explicitly adapts the work of Rothausen et al. (2017), who employ a narrative sensemaking approach to examine the how and why of different stages of identity threat, examining the processes by which individuals stay or leave an organisation. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is an ongoing, social process where individuals relate themselves to their environment by processing the social cues they receive – in this case as they transition into and through academia.

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Pracademics in Remote Environments

By initially adapting the PTREAD process (Figure 1) conceptualised by Rothausen et al. (2017) we can explore how our participants are triggered into reactive identity work due to perceived threat, as current frameworks of understanding struggle to be reconciled to new demands or environments. The process begins with cognitive dissonance-discomfort with some part of professional identity where an individual evaluates and possibly revises their personal purpose (Purpose). The second stage involves activity in which the individual attempts to create a coherent narrative that links past to present identities (Trajectory). During this process, individuals examine how they fit within the organisation in relation to colleagues (Relatedness). During the last stage of the narrative, the individual examines themselves and their role in relation to their environment (Expression), this may be a way of doing things that contradicts given practice. These steps result in evaluation of both the extent to which individuals feel accepted (Acceptance), and ways in which they feel they contribute something relating to their practical experience (Differentiation).

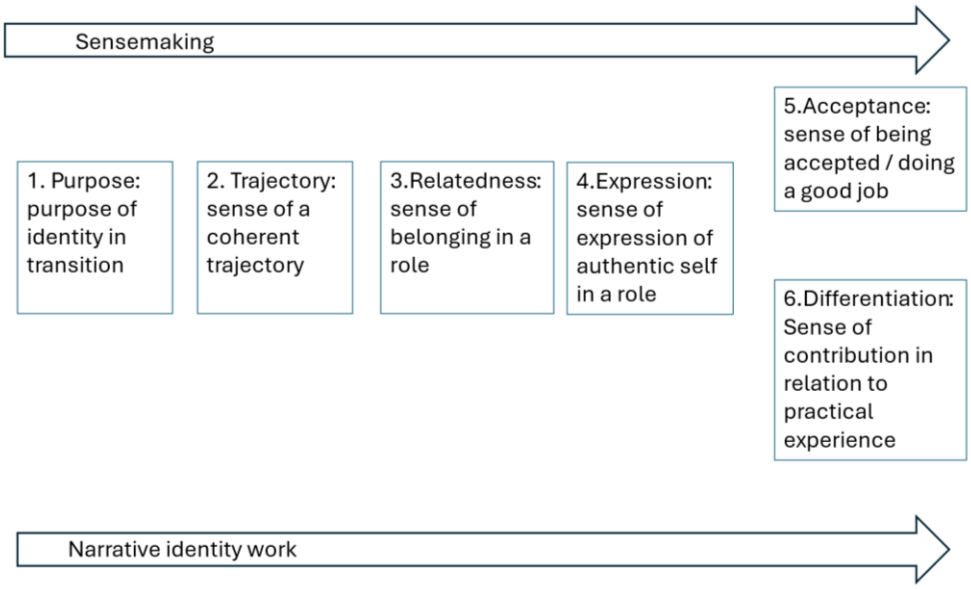

Figure 1. Pracademic identity formation and revision:conceptual framework (PTREAD) (adapted from Rothausen et al., 2017).

Framing the Study

As discussed above, this paper adopts a narrative, sensemaking approach to pracademic identity work, developing conceptualisations from Rothausen et al. (2017) as an initial study framework. As detailed in the methodology section below, this was then adapted following a pilot study, where the team chose to bring in elements of meaningfulness at work, such as values and organisational practices, as set out by Bailey et al. (2019). Finally, coding from the full set of interviews yielded our final set of themes (Figure 2).

In common with other research into identity work, the process assumes that individuals label and categorise their experiences and insights, in which social interactions form and shape feelings of credibility and salience in their roles (Martin et al., 2020). We see this as a continuing process, as individuals form and re-form their sense of professional selves. This, in turn forms narrative cycles, in this case, either of leaving (the organisation)

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or remaining within it. With this in mind, we now move to explain the method, sample and coding framework for our study.

Sample and Method

The study takes a case study approach (Deem & Brehony, 1994), with a sample drawn from a single UK digital business school. Sixteen academics from different disciplines within the school self-selected to be interviewed as 'pracademics' with prior professional experience. The approach fitted established recommendations for sample sizing for rich analysis within narrative research, based on our previous work (Baxter & Floyd, 2019).

The project was cleared by the Ethics Committee at the University on condition of complete anonymisation of participants before researchers were given access to the data which ensured no conflict of interest. Questions are listed in Appendix 01. Interviews were conducted and transcribed via MS Teams. Transcripts were then cleaned and coded according to our framework for analysis

Data Analysis

To ensure data reliability and authenticity, the team followed recommended narrative research procedures (Clough, 2002). An initial pilot project of three interviews was carried out to test initial questions and suitability of the chosen framework for analysis, these were independently coded before the team converged to ensure a consistent interpretation. During convergence discussions, it was agreed to adapt and extend the initial Rothausen framework to include selected themes from Bailey et al, (2018) as a stretched model better fit early pilot data. However, in coding the final dataset, the team developed their own extended code book that enabled each to co-code thematically and agree final codes and sub-codes (Figure 2).

1. Purpose		After Rothausen et al (2017)
2. Trajectory		
3. Relatedness		
4. Expression		
5. Acceptance		
6. Differentiation		
7. Values	How do individuals express values and aspiration within identities?	After Bailey et al (2018)
8. Policies and practice	What policies and practices support/challenge narratives and trajectories?	
9. Schema change	What evidence of schema change is present in narratives?	Research Team generated themes
10. Projection and reflection	Who am I and what do I do? How do these questions impact on crafting a salient identity?	
11. Aspirational identity conflict	Identities individuals wished to inhabit – but felt were failing to achieve	
12. Professionalism	The search for (renewed) professionalism	
13. Support	Relates to support participants felt helpful in creating a sense of salience and agency	

Figure 2. Coding framework principal themes adapted from Rothausen et al., 2017 alongside additional themes identified as part of our pilot and final coding process

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Here, in addition to Rothausen et al. (2017) stages of leaving/remaining narratives, and contributions from Bailey et al. (2019) we identitified an additional five elements which were valuable in investigating our specific research questions. These are discussed under our findings below. Figure 2 contains our adaptation of Figure 1, following additional themes identified during the pilot and final full coding.

Findings and Discussion

This study set out to evaluate the ways in which pracademics in a UK digital business school aim to create coherent narratives between past and present identities and find meaning and purpose in their work. In keeping with a narrative approach, this section of the paper merges our findings with our discussion, in order to provide coherence in responding to the research questions (McLean, 2008; Slay & Smith, 2011). We discuss findings in relation to three core themes:

1. Entering Academia: Assumptions.
2. Professional identity: Purpose, Expression and Differentiation.
3. Trajectory Coherence and Relatedness.

Theoretical Model and Additional Themes

During *the main phase* of the coding, five further themes were developed in relation to the question of finding meaning in work for transitioners. These are outlined below.

The first additional theme, Theme 8, policies and practices relates to how individuals coped with transitions that might appear straightforward or sensible to those well-versed in academic life, such as coming from another university, but appeared challenging or 'a frustrating experience' (P15) for those coming in from practice. One example from a former police officer (P9) reported, 'it was quite overwhelming because we were being taught lots of stuff around process things around boards and module results panels…I've only got to use it four years down the line'. Theme 9, Schema change considered evidence for accomodation within the identity narrative, where we saw this element constructed in relation to changes in fundamental understandings of what constitutes 'being an academic' and how individuals relate to this.

Theme 10, Projection and reflection*:* was drawn from where we saw respondents wrestling with repurposing and recrafting identity within the academy, which sat alongside Theme 11 Aspirational identity conflict; coming from findings where we noted emotional tensions from percieved barriers to achieving a full, actualised academic identity. These were the identities that individuals wished to inhabit but felt they were failing to achieve. For example, one individual described their role as 'falling between the cracks'(P9). Whilst another struggled with the tensions between having been an outstanding practitioner and feeling like a 'struggling lecturer.' (P8). These tensions were in some senses, productive, in terms of the intense identity work happening as a result of this cognitive dissonance, but in other senses, betrayed a lack of purpose and meaning within their work.

Theme 12, Feelings of Professionalism, reflects the search for a sense of professionalism, often one thought to be missing in the present role, as one participant explained: 'I'm not who I was in my previous life; I don't have that sense of professionalism'. (P8). Whilst the final theme, Theme 13, relates to the support that individuals feel most

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helpful in creating a sense of professional salience and agency. Exemplar codes are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1.
Exemplar citations according to coding scheme.

1. Purpose	I'm not sure anything prepared me for this. It's different, it's so, so different. Its, um. And I find it, in all honesty, I find what we call teaching quite empty. I find it very administrative and if I weren't doing my dissertation supervision, if I weren't lecturing at my previous employer, I'd feel quite empty. (P6)
2. Trajectory	So, my PhD looked a lot at the way we socially construct, the sense of who a police officer is. And that was important as a part of my research to understand how we control what emotions police officers are allowed to have. It was a lot of research about me figuring out what was going on with me. How do we socially construct the police officer? How was I socially constructed. So, I was already in that identity space in understanding my research and understanding myself… so I've lost my identity, that recognition. What is my new identity? Then I was able to say, well, academia is a place where I feel I fit and that identity fits with me… it helped my mental health in terms of I needed to understand myself. (P16)
3. Relatedness	Materials have been adapted for [secure environments]. And we just had a bit of reflection on why those resources, why additional resources? Why were they adapted? Why were they produced in a certain way, and not available to other students… is the learning experience equal or different? Were we being fair or unfair? … pedagogical assumptions…we could do with more of those conversations….(P4)
4. Expression	When you talk people through stuff and they get a handle, and then their own autonomy on what they're learning, you can see such a big change in people. So that's probably my main thing, in helping support that journey (P9)
5. Acceptance	I don't feel valued particularly. That sounds negative, I feel more valued because I know there is short-staffing, and they think thank God you're here. Here, let me give you all this work. So, in that sense I am valued whether I am valued individually, I don't know. (P1)
6. Differentiation	I mean, I really enjoy knowledge exchange work. I love to take some thinking, for example, of…working with partners in Scotland, and at very large events organised by the voluntary sector in Scotland. I'm meeting people, talk[ing] with people and then, you know stand up infront alongside colleagues and actually talk about our work, our research…. (P4)
7. Values	Having come... from a traditional university…. we talk about teaching, we talk about production, and I get that I'm producing materials – that's our teaching. But module chair? I don't see that from a teaching position, and I struggle….how I am actually teaching? I really struggle with the concept of teaching in this university (P6)
8. Policies and practice	It's a current joke between me and my line manager. I didn't have an induction. It was like you used to work here. You know what you are doing …. I had a very difficult few weeks because some people, just like, well… you won't need any training…. but that was a different role! (R1)
9. Schema change	I'm really keen on collaborative ways of working, and in many ways the university and academia encourage that. But there is also academic work, which is very, very individualistic, and it doesn't align with my values…it's an inherent tension… Most of the time I try to find a way to live with the tension and confusion (P4)
10. Projection and reflection	I'm not really integral and I'm not contributing significantly…. I'm trying to find different ways to engage. For example…. try and take on a PhD student for a project I've got going…. Yeah, I don't feel part of academia as I daily exist P5)
11. Aspirational identity conflict	I started as a teaching fellow and there are no teaching fellows anymore. There were a few of us brought in to cover for the last REF and people didn't quite understand what we did…. we just did more teaching. So as a result, I'm sort of falling between the cracks (P9)
12. Professionalism	Actually, we are so busy doing the practical elements of our role that we can't really do much else. So quite often you wonder what you are (P10)
13. Support	Support is a difficult one…. development events made me feel more worthy (P13

Entering Academia: Assumptions

We begin this section by examining why individuals entered the digital business school and move to examining whether and how pracademics create coherent and meaningful

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narratives, before moving to the final element within this section; how they feel that the digital business school may aid this transition and what support they feel has been effective.

Table 2.
Reasons why individuals joined the digital business school

Reasons for entering academia	PhD	Writing training /teaching materials	To go into research	To make a difference to practice	To escape work pressures	Other
Some individuals responded in more than one category	6	7	5	3	3	To change my lifestyle Lack of opportunity for progression Alienation with management/organisation

As Table 2 illustrates, there are differing reasons why practitioners entered the digital business school. For some participants it was due to either undertaking a PhD or being part way through one. Seven respondents stated that it was to work more intensively in teaching and course development. Only five respondents mentioned research, whilst three stated that they thought they would be able to positively influence practice by making the move. Three cited work pressures, assuming that these would be less in an academic role. There were three additional rationales given (column 'Other').

Those that entered academia on completion of a PhD had less of a mismatch between their actual role and prior assumptions of it, as this individual explains:

> My pilot project for my PhD, which is looking at mental health in [my discipline and practice]. And that's kind of like how I transitioned. I went through a massive what I'd say identity crisis because I was being a police officer it was really integral to my sense of who I am: it permeates every part of your life (P6).

But those that came directly from practice who entered to focus on teaching, expressed surprise and disappointment that their role was not one in which they taught students directly. Illustrated by one participant's comments:

> Because I have such a strong and successful in industry background. My teaching style and my teaching method is basically bringing that back into the classroom, talking about my experiences talking about models and materials and theories and concepts in a practical way that will be implemented in in real life and I don't have that. That ability at here because of the way that we teach at a distance (P5).

Although they knew they were coming into a digital business school, few, particularly those from the field of policing, had anticipated the impact of the psychological and physical distance from peers. They missed this element of collegiality which by and large had been present in their past roles (p11, p6, p5, p12, p14, p1, p3), as one reported:

> I'm not sure anything prepared me for this. It's so different, and I find it, in all honesty, I find what we call teaching, really quite empty [….] very administrative (P6).

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Some individuals were making concerted efforts to come to terms with this adaptation, for example, seeking PhD or thesis supervision, some were attempting and succeeding to maintain teaching roles with other organisations, or indeed within their present one in an associate tutor capacity. This appeared to provide them with purpose coherence in trajectory and a sense of relatedness and means by which they could express the duality of their role as academics and practitioners:

> So, I lecture for [xxx] organisation, and that helps to give me a sense of purpose (P9).

Professional Identity, Purpose, Expression and Differentiation

The digital environment, particularly since the covid 19 pandemic appears to have left a number of individuals feeling that they were not 'proper academics' in the true sense of the word. Asking, 'what is a *proper* academic in the digital environment?' which echoes challenges in other studies (Empson, 2013) but appears to be compounded by the particular form of teaching at this institution, which largely takes the form of module design, writing and admin (in common with other digital universities). Aligning with the findings of Ennals et al. (2018), some pracademics, particularly from the field of policing, had entered the organisation to focus on teaching (as they understood it from their previous practice). However, they found that remoteness from students combined with overburdening with management and administrative duties, clearly represented an identity threat, as they were unable to find the desired purpose in this form of teaching. This compounded feelings of insecurity in relation to being a 'proper academic' (p6) and represents a substantial departure from existing literature based on pracademics in campus-based universities (Ennals et al., 2016; Santoro & Snead, 2018). This finding points to a greater need to outline, before appointment, what teaching in a large-scale distance institution actually means in reality, so that individuals are clear about the lack of student contact before they begin their role. The idea of a 'proper academic', appeared to be a faculty hegemony, but difficult to define in practice. Several respondents mentioned this ideal, but when questioned, were largely unable to describe its essence. All of the participants questioned on this did however, mention production of academic papers and income generation, as a key element of being, 'a proper academic.'

Lack of direct contact with students also implies that individuals must find different people with whom they can try out their nascent academic identities - to carry out the redefining work mentioned by Herman et al. (2021) and Lam (2021), illustrated by the comments from this participant:

> So I've come over to policing and feel very disconnected from the real world [….] my world I'm trying to also integrate into this other world that frankly I feel quite removed from at the moment (P6).

Participants in a number of instances, missed the respect accorded to them in their professional worlds as this individual from policing reports:

> It's to do with where I'm respected and known, so I go back there to get that sense of it (P12).

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Pracademics in Remote Environments

There was a strong indication that reliance on line managers for identity and direction was key in the remote environment, with 70% of participants stating that they rely on their line manager for both their career development and identity conundrums. This emerged from a distinct lack of knowledge of where to go for various queries: a lack of organisational knowledge and a sense of the faculty and its culture infused many of the narratives. This places undue pressure on line managers who are accorded only 3 days per week in the role. This time pressure would appear to leave little time for managers to coach and mentor their staff, in the way that many participants wished.

Trajectory Coherence and Relatedness

There was a great deal of indecision in terms of whether this environment was creating meaningful work opportunities for individuals, and this manifested in a hesitancy to engage in the faculty community, as this individual points out:

> I'm not sure there is a day when I moved from do you know I belong to another community of practice and I'm not in this one, for me it is it is just a continual journey of, do I want to inhabit that space? Um, why do I want to identify myself in that way? What are the parameters I wanna put around myself and being confident enough about that individual work alongside? (P8).

This hesitancy to fully engage in a community of practice, appears in the literature as an indication that the individual is on a trajectory of exit (Lave & Wenger, 1991): manifesting as a reluctance to fully engage with the new environment. In terms of guidance, there appeared to be few opportunities for participants to discuss their concerns and fears in a safe space. Although peer mentoring was mentioned by two participants, it appeared to be spasmodic and not particularly valued within this setting as these participants report:

> Some formal training and mentor support for the role to facilitate the transition would be helpful (P12).
>
> Mentoring is needed to make those connections that you wouldn't otherwise make (P7).
>
> We should have teaching mentors as well as research mentors, so we can talk about stuff more (P11).

Although the literature on mentoring in academia is extensive and illustrates some impact on retention and academic progression (Shen et al., 2022), it takes on a slightly different complexion when carried out in the online environment, and additionally with pracademics (Dorner et al., 2021). For example, some studies report that far more training for mentoring is required in the online environment than a physical one, and that clarity of expectations and competence with technologies is an integral part of this (Dorner et al., 2021; Cree-Green et al., 2020).

Coaching too was highlighted as being desirable in this environment, and several participants felt that line managers should be taking a more active coaching role, 'I think that more coaching might help me adapt' (P7). Again, this has training and development implications, for the faculty, as well as policy implications for the leadership team. There is currently no coaching policy attached to the faculty, and this would need to be developed. However, as coaching is a well-established way in which individuals can integrate multiple

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identities (Yip et al., 2020), the investment in an area where individuals are struggling and creating narratives of exit, may well pay off in terms of retention. Although there is a university level coaching scheme, it is seen as mainly available for senior managers, a not uncommon assumption in many institutions of this nature (Yip et al., 2020).

As reported in the previous section, line managers were the first line of support for many of the participants- just over 80%-the reasons for this were multifarious. Some examples include lack of information about where to go for policies and practical help on various employment issues; lack of knowledge about the teaching cultures; lack of awareness of the organisational culture, and a need to clarify areas of teaching concern. The complexity of the institution was noted by over half of the participants, who felt that they needed a face-to-face induction to the campus. They explained that this would have allowed them to see first hand where the various departments were and to make sense of the different elements of the production of teaching materials. Line managers, according to participants, were not always aware of certain factors themselves, particularly if they were relatively new to post. Individuals suggested a number of ways in which a sense of belonging and support, could be created by the faculty.

A summary of support needs and the areas they could address within our theoretical model, appears in Figure 3.

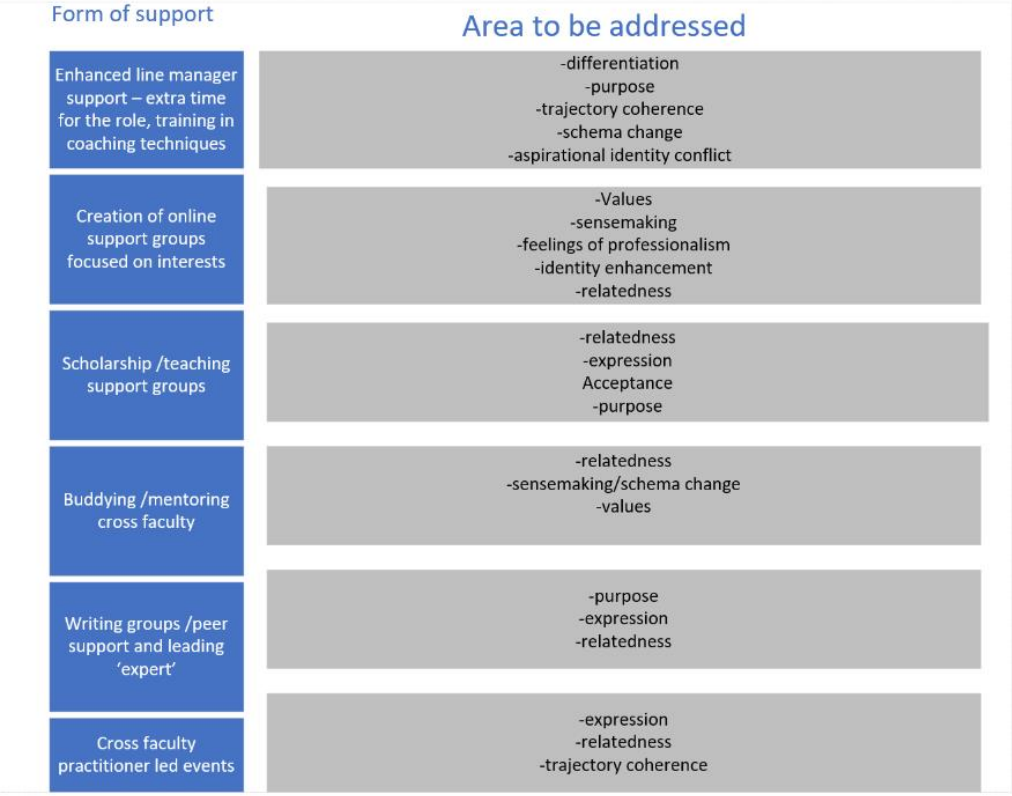

Figure 3. Forms of support and areas to be addressed

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Implications for Theory and Practice

The purpose of this paper was to examine some of the challenges facing pracademics as they attempt to integrate and reconcile past identities with their current roles. Thirteen key elements were considered, using as an initial basis Rothausen et al.'s (2017), framework for identity trajectories, to provide insights into how pracademics in a digital business school create coherent and meaningful identity narratives in a remote environment, and what forms of support they have/would find useful. In adapting the Rothausen framework we were able to examine thirteen elements that offered insights into identity trajectory creation, whether and how pracademics are finding meaning in the digital environment, and what support would be most useful in creating and sustaining meaning in their work and identities. The results in our previous section illustrate a worrying trend, with many participants indicating trajectories of exit. For some, the trajectory was in the early stages and there were indications that with interventions, these individuals may be persuaded to remain. However, in other cases the extent of their alienation indicates with a reasonable degree of certainty, their intention to leave the organisation. Organisational cultures are slow to change, but practical suggestions of how faculty leadership teams can address some of the issues arising from this paper, are possible to achieve.

This article has highlighted areas in which leaders may wish to focus in order to actively support pracademics and their emergent identities and practice; these areas are listed in Figure 3. Some of the recommendations have policy implications for the faculty, some undoubtedly have costs associated with them. But failure to act could in the longer term prove even more costly. The costs linked to staff attrition are high, not only in recruitment terms, but in terms of student success. Practitioners bring unique experiences to bear on the student journey, and this lends them professional credibility as well as important insights for professional programmes, such as the Chartered Management Apprenticeship, or the MBA. To assume that these staff will integrate in the same way as those who have come from an academic trajectory, fails to factor in the strong identities and years of experience that permit practitioners to contribute to student learning in an effective and coherent manner.

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Originality Note

This is an original article and not published elsewhere. Proper citations are included where others' works are used.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this research.

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions

Qualitative Questions (for the audio interview):

Block 1 – About you.

1. Can you tell me a bit about your professional background.
2. Why did you decide to come into academia.
3. What is your current role ?
4. How long have you worked here ?
5. What does your role entail ?
6. How do you describe teaching in your present role?

Block 2 – Prior experience.

1. Have you done any teaching , writing materials or previous training roles before ?
2. If so , what did you enjoy about it ?
3. Do you have any formal teaching qualifications ?
4. What made you feel professional and effective in your previous role ?
5. What in your previous role prepared you for this role ?
6. What beliefs about academia did you have before beginning your role ?

Block 3- Present practice.

1. Do you feel as professional and effective in your current role as you did in your previous one ?
2. V= Do you feel that your skillset acquired during professional practice is being fully utilised in this role ?
3. How are you learning your role here ?
4. Have these beliefs changed or been challenged ? Explain how and why.
5. Does your present role align with your values ? If not why not and what will you do about it?
6. Tell me about learning (formal or informal) that has helped you feel part of FBL ?
7. Did you have an induction to your role ? Tell me how this made you feel in relation to your confidence in your current role?
8. Who , so far , has been influential in you understanding/ feeling supported in your role and why ?
9. Do you feel that scholarship work is important to your role and how you feel about it ? (If so why, if not, why).
10. What interactions have you had with students /ALs and how did they make you feel about how you are performing your role ?
11. What makes you feel as if you are doing a good job in the various aspects of your role ?
12. Do you feel valued in your current role?
13. Has your present role influenced your understanding of how people learn ? If so how ?
14. How do you describe your work to your friends ?
15. Do you feel part of a community of practice ? If so , why , if not , why
16. Have you ever carried out scholarship work (SoTL) ? If so why did you do this and has it affected how you feel about your role ?
17. Are there elements of you that you feel you can't express in your current role and were able to do so in your previous one ?
18. Describe one or more rewarding instances that you have had whilst in this role
19. What aspects of your role do you feel most and least confident in ?
20. Are there any sources outside of the university that help you feel professional ?
21. What opportunities do you have for reflecting on your teaching practice?

a. How do you make time for those?

b. Please describe a recent reflection that you made that influenced or changed your practice.

Block 4 future practice.

1. Do you plan to carry out future scholarship ? If so why ?
2. How do you prepare for inhabiting the identity you aspire to.

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Table 3.
Supplementary Information

Time in practice (in years):			
0-5 years	6-10 years	11-20 years	Over 20 years
7.14%	7.14%	35.71%	50%
Time since left practice (in years):			
0-5 years	6-10 years	11-20 years	Over 20 years
33.3%	20%	33.3%	13.3%

Role as academic (in years):			
<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	Over 10 years
20%	33%	27%	20%
Academic discipline			
Policing	Business /Management	Specified sub discipline:	
40%	39%	Organisations (7%; HR 7%; Marketing 7%)	

Prof. Dr. Jacqueline Baxter is Professor of Public Leadership and Management at The Open University Business School, and former Director of SCiLAB (the Centre for Innovation in Online Business and Legal Education). She is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. Her most recent book (edited) is *Creativity and Critique in Digital Learning and Teaching: Insights for Learning Design in Business and Law* (2025), *and Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform: Global Perspectives in Comparative Education* (2020).

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