

Identity work in the transition from manager to management academic

John Blenkinsopp
Lecturer in Management
University of Newcastle upon Tyne Business School
5th Floor, Ridley Building
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 7RU

+44(191) 222 8145

john.blenkinsopp@ncl.ac.uk

Brenda Stalker
Lecturer in Human Resource Development
University of Northumbria
Northumberland Building
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 8ST

+44(191) 227 3315

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Abstract

The phenomenon of current practitioners moving into academia is generally welcomed in terms addressing recruitment problems and the perceived benefit of bringing practical experience into the academic setting. Yet the individual practitioner may encounter considerable difficulties with this career transition. We identify the different sources and discourses of credibility – management experience versus academic knowledge - as particularly relevant. This article considers the ways in which these ‘emergent management academics’ manage their self-identities in their day to day interactions.

Keywords

Self-identity, managers, academics, identity work.

Introduction

This article considers the ways in which managers entering academia as management academics ‘manage’ their identities. This group is important to universities and the wider economy, as they help to address recruitment needs and are perceived to bring the perspective of the real world into the supposedly cloistered domain of universities.

This article draws upon examples from within several Business Schools and is thus partly ethnographic in content. Both authors fall into the category of ‘managers turned management academics’, and have worked alongside numerous academics with similar backgrounds. For brevity, we will henceforth refer to ‘our participants’, although it should be acknowledged we are drawing together ‘data’ from informal and unintended observation over an extended period – no doubt our colleagues and ex-colleagues would be surprised to be described as our participants!

The article begins by considering issues of self-identity and self-presentation, and their relevance to individuals in periods of transition. We consider the context in which identity work takes place, which we interpret in terms of the prevailing discourses. In considering the transition from manager to management academic, we draw upon the idea of the ‘emergent manager’ (Watson and Harris, 1999). Managers are involved in an ongoing process of ‘becoming’ a manager – they do not ‘become’ managers by taking on a managerial role. Our participants can thus be considered ‘emergent management academics’. Although our emphasis is on identity work in the initial transition from manager to academic, this identity work continues, particularly when there are changes and shifts in the prevailing discourses.

Finally, we examine how these individuals appear to do identity work, in terms of the discourses they draw upon in day to day interactions, and consider the implications of these issues for practice.

Self-identity and self-presentation

Following Giddens (1991), we view identity as a 'reflexive project', in which individuals construct and manage their identity as a self-narrative. This narrative can be seen to 'do work', in the sense used within discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Giddens suggests that although individuals make choices, they shape their identity within a social context, which both enables and constrains these choices. For this reason, the narrative of self-identity is likely to be congruent with available discourses.

We are concerned with exploring how our participants 'manage' their identity in terms of how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. There is a tension between presentation of self and self-identity. Drawing upon the idea of self-identity as a narrative, we might think about narrative credibility. In popular culture, celebrities are sometimes described as attempting to 're-invent' themselves, and journalists comment freely on whether they see the attempted 're-invention' as credible. One obvious constraint is others' awareness of one's history – Jackall (1988) noted managers found it difficult to switch allegiance from one senior figure to another, as their previous allegiance was widely known. There are also more generic constraints, for example whether persons of a particular 'type' are deemed credible in a particular role.

Identity construction can be viewed as a situated learning process, enacted within a complex system of dynamic interactions between diverse sources. Dominant frames of reference, which serve to inform an individual's sense of identity, are both explicitly and tacitly influential at differing levels of consciousness. We will therefore outline what we perceive as the prevailing dominant discourses, in order to explore how they may inform the construction of the 'reflexive project' that is the 'emergent management academic'. The focus of our enquiry is from the perspective of the individual - in examining the processes of their reflexive 'sense-making', we seek to inform our understanding of how management academics engage in the ongoing project of constructing their self-identity.

Identity construction during transition

Individuals involved in any form of transition are necessarily involved in identity work, whether minor ('this is my new address') or major ('I'll be living as a woman from now on'). We might identify two aspects to this identity work. The first relates to social constructionist ideas in which self-identity is produced in interactions with others, interactions which tend to produce identities which in some way 'fit' (cf. Mead 1934). The second aspect involves more conscious, tactical considerations, illustrated by Jackall's (1988) study of corporate managers who comment how their career progression depends on 'selling' (an idea of) themselves, including their lifestyle (Jackall, 1988: 45, 61).

Giddens (1991) suggests 'lifestyle' is a key aspect of self-identity, and individuals are involved in making lifestyle choices far beyond traditional consumerist conceptions of lifestyle. This seems particularly pertinent for our participants, for whom the move from

management to academia represents a lifestyle choice, for two reasons. Firstly, it is perceived as a career move which is not easily 'reversible' – working as an academic does not add to one's 'career capital' as a manager, and participants were aware that over time their management experience became less and less 'marketable' outside of academia. Secondly, considerations involved in choosing to work in academia appear to extend beyond 'mere' careerist calculations, in that our participants considered a wider range of factors in making their decision.

Different theoretical lenses can be applied to describe individuals' response to transitions, but in this context we are interested in how the individual makes sense of the change and thus we draw closely on Weick (1995). For Weick, sensemaking begins with a 'sensemaker' and is grounded in the process of constructing identity. The process of sensemaking is seen as 'retrospective', through deliberate reflexive examination of 'lived experiences'. However, there is recognition that individuals are intimately connected with their social environment, and through their interactions create the constraints and opportunities within their field of practice. Sensemaking is a social process in which the concept and conduct of self is construed in the context of others, with knowledge of past and present and in anticipation of the future. In organisations, decisions are made in the presence of others, or with the knowledge they will have to be 'defended' to others, thereby influencing our sensemaking and subsequent decision making processes. Weick emphasises it is a 'working project' (cf. Giddens), continuous and prompted by 'cues' in the environment upon which they can make 'enough sense' to inform their response. Language is a critical tool in the process of sensemaking, embedded in ongoing reflexive conversations with our self and others. In the context of our study, we argue the dynamics of the situation require individuals to manage their identity so as to present themselves as 'fitting'.

The impact of prevailing discourses

Defining discourse

Discourse, like identity, is widely and variously used. Some of the most influential models of discourse can be seen to operate at different levels of analysis. As used by Foucault (e.g. 1977) discourses are sociological in character, created at the level of societies or institutions, although influencing individual behaviour. Potter and Wetherell (1987) propose a more localised interpretation of discourse, in which groups may develop discursive resources to account for more localised situations (albeit drawing upon wider discourses). Finally, Harré (1998) suggests a conception of the self as discursively created in interactions with others but also in 'conversation' with ourselves. The importance of these distinctions for identity is that individuals can be seen to (re)construct self-identity within a given context, drawing upon a range of discursive resources in doing so.

Christensen and Cheney (1994) suggest discourse "is a way of thinking about and acting within the world; it is both world view and practice" (Christensen and Cheney, 1994:231). Taken together language, thought, action and physical artefacts constitute

discourse and individuals construct their identities within ‘discourse communities’ (Yanow, 1999), which provide opportunities for ‘dialogue’. Whilst discourse communities are a feature of organisational life they often transcend institutional boundaries – academics are typically also members of wider discourse communities, e.g. ‘sociologists’. Within this context an evolving sense of self-identity emerges over time and space, as individuals enact their current self-identity within their social environment and respond to the consequences of their interactions (Weick, 1995). Individuals are engaged in several discourse communities at any one time, and will be discursively shaping and shaped by the nature of their participation. Any concept of identity from this perspective is seen as contextually embedded, dynamic and adaptive, engaged in a process of ‘becoming’. Czarniawska-Joerges (1996) suggests we should treat identity as ‘a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and audience formulate, edit, applaud and refuse various elements of the constantly produced narrative’ (in Moore and Sonsino, 2003:212)

Discourses of change in Higher Education

The restructuring of the ‘workplace’ (university) impacts upon notions of academic identity and leads to the creation of new identities, discursively shaped and mediated through the micro-processes of daily work. The relationship between the production of knowledge and the identity of the labourer represents the nexus between identity formation and discourse within a socio-political context. The new discourses on knowledge challenge traditional ideas of what counts as ‘valid’ knowledge and the role of academics and universities in generating it (Gibbons et al, 1994). The dominant epistemological discourse emphasises knowledge, and new forms of knowledge are valorised for their ‘performativity’ aspects (Garrick, 1998). This discursive shift has implication for formation of identities, particularly the extent to which individual academics experience the dominant organisational discourse(s) as consonant or in conflict with their self-identity. For some individuals, emerging discourses may have greater degree of consonance with their self-identity. In general however, our participants appeared to experience the changes as challenging, demanding a ‘performance’ (after Goffman) at some distance from their current self-identity and thus requiring considerable identity work.

Implications for academic identity

In terms of identity for management academics, these wider discourses seem likely to contribute to construction of new and different practices and knowledge, more socially accountable or commercially marketable. Knowledge is discursively constructed as a commodity valued in economic terms for its exchange value, where knowledge and education are linked with economic goals (Garrick, 1998). This tends to privilege particular forms of research – empirical, applied and of immediate relevance to organisations.

Chappell et al (2000) argue that, whilst discourses provide the rules for playing the games, they do not prescribe these rules, which are constantly being reworked as

academics acquire new roles and positions. There are likely to be institutional variations in the way these global discourses are enacted – across different disciplines and universities. Current debates on the nature of research illustrate this in the different ‘games’ which describe research practice (Stronach and Maclure, 1997). Academics are engaged in different modes of knowledge production and management as they confront what is ‘legitimate knowledge’.

Within this wider context, it could be argued business school identities were already associated with vocational and professional knowledge. They have generally deployed knowledge discourses that privilege applied, contextualised and interdisciplinary knowledge over knowledge that is theoretical, general and disciplinary. The new discourse thus represents less of a dramatic change for business schools, instead their ‘identity crisis’ arises from competition for students – within a now global education marketplace, but also from industry delivered learning and professional body accredited programmes – and from attempting to attain/maintain a research position which attracts funding from an increasingly diverse and prescriptive range of stakeholders.

Self-identity in the context of organisational identity

Against this background, recruiting practising managers to academic roles seems an attractive proposition for Business Schools. However, whilst current managerial experience may provide the individual with an entrée to academia, once in post s/he encounters ambivalent attitudes towards this experience. It may remain relevant and a source of credibility in some settings, particularly for example with post-experience students and potential partners/customers in business. However, the currency (in both senses) of this experience reduces over time.

A practising manager moving into academia must engage with a range of complex and contradictory demands upon his/her “identity”. S/he joins a new ‘community of discourse’, significantly different from that of the management practitioner. Perhaps the most significant ‘community of discourse’ within which academics are embedded is the boundaries and practices of their own institutions, so interactions construed within the dominant organisational discourse(s) will be a frame of reference for the evolving reflexive project of self identity.

Organisational identity is distinct from any concept of ‘brand’ but rather, “refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about their organisations” (Moore and Sonsino 2003:191). Gioia et al (2000) categorise organisational identity as a “potentially precarious and unstable notion, frequently up for redefinition and revision by organisational members”, and argue that it is this very ‘adaptive instability’ of identity that facilitates organisational change. Moore and Sonsino (2003:1995) suggest senior managers should lead organisations by concentrating on their “dynamic identity”, arguing that influencing organisational identity sustains competitive advantage:

the organisational identity of these complex organisations is the only thing left for senior executives to influence, or disturb...it is the constant verbal positioning of

everyone within a firm that subtly refines and recreates a series of organisational identities, transient and endlessly emergent.

(Moore and Sonsino 2003:199)

The dominant voices in any organisation will thus seek to ‘articulate’ their ‘world view’ and give a future-focused vision of organisational identity, which Moore and Sonsino term ‘prospective sense-giving’. However, any significant changes in organisational identity will require simultaneous changes in structures, systems, practices and people, congruent with the new organisational identity.

Vince (1999) argues that organisations have an ‘organisational dynamic’ (Miller and Rice, 1967), constructed and reconstructed through the process of organising, which has a reflexive impact on individuals. He suggests organising is a process that “mobilises defences against learning, as much as a process within which learning is possible” (Vince, 1999:1062). In examining the role of emotion in organisational learning, particularly ‘negative’ emotions such as anxiety (which he terms ‘uncomfortable knowledge’), Vince argues that individual feelings of anxiety can be a reflection of organisational concerns (e.g. over research ratings or student numbers). Organisational anxieties create emotional states for the individual ‘embodied through the process of “organisational politics”’, thus individuals may be required to reconstruct their identity within a political narrative of organisational ‘priorities’ (e.g. between teaching and research) in line with reconstructing new organisational identities.

Individuals may therefore become the focus for systemic issues and their behaviour comes to represent organisational issues – concerns of ‘organisational identity’ can thus be communicated or interpreted as a crisis of self-identity. Vince (1999) suggests such anxieties or ‘cues’ (Weick, 1995) provide ‘strategic moments’ for individuals, where the anxiety can be held and worked through to some form of insight, or ignored to create a state of ‘willing ignorance’ – either outcome highlights the potentially strategic importance of emotion in organisations. In terms of individual identity work, such ‘organisation induced’ reflexive moments could be a feature in the landscape of constructing ‘self-identity’. How do individuals make sense of the ‘unexperienced future’ and how might they ‘anticipate’ their own role in it, through their current thoughts, feelings and actions? The reciprocal interaction between evolving individual and organisational identities is complex and dynamic, and whilst we recognise the limitations of privileging an individual perspective in this analysis, it provides insights into how broader discourses may influence or even disturb the construction of identity for management academics.

Identity construction in the transition from manager to management academic

Who am I?

Until now we have used the term ‘academic’ as if it was a simple, uncontested label used by individuals to identify their occupation. However for some participants their identification with the label ‘academic’ was problematic, in a manner which resonates

with wider debates on the role of academia and the value of academic knowledge 'in the real world'. This seems associated with the distinctions/divisions perceived by some between the teaching and research elements of the academic's role. Goffman (1959) suggests that self-presentation is linked to a notion of audience segregation i.e. the opportunity to present ourselves in different ways to different audiences. Some participants were comfortable with the idea of being a 'lecturer' who teaches students but distinctly uncomfortable describing themselves as an 'academic' who 'researches' - particularly in terms of how they present themselves in conversations with their colleagues. Even the term 'lecturer' was viewed as rather too grand by some participants, who used it as the term in general use but privately thought of themselves as 'teachers' or even 'trainers'. The importance of such distinctions in terms of self-identity is arguably reified by the increasingly widespread institutional practice of auditing and categorising the research activity/capability of individual academics. The detail of this practice varies, but a common feature appears to be the option to categorise an individual as research inactive (or similar term). Our participants were often acutely aware of the significance of this 'strategic moment' (Vince, 1999) and the implications of the 'label' for steering future career opportunities.

Anticipatory identity work?

Becker et al (1961) used the term anticipatory socialisation to describe their observation that medical students appeared to shape their attitudes, beliefs, behaviours etc. in anticipation of their future status as doctors. In a slightly different manner, Blenkinsopp (2003) suggested prospective recruits to a tobacco company's graduate training scheme could be seen to engage in 'anticipatory sensemaking'. Weick (1993) suggests that sensemaking occurs in response to behavioural commitment (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), but Blenkinsopp argues that sensemaking might also be seen to occur in situations in which the individual perceives that behavioural commitment is likely.

In both cases, identity is a central concept, since the individual can be seen to manage current self-identity (and self-presentation) in anticipation of some expected future identity. In the first instance, acting/talking/thinking as a future medic might be expected to behave. In the second instance, re-working current identity in anticipation of a expected behavioural deviation from currently exhibited behaviours and/or espoused values or attitudes.

In the case of our participants, the expected future state appeared to be some notion of becoming a 'proper' academic, leaving behind one's practitioner roots and engaging fully in an academic role, in particular through becoming research active (or in some way associating oneself with research). Giddens (1991) uses the term 'trajectory of the self' to describe this sense of shaping one's self-identity. It is interesting that this future state appears influential in identity work even for individuals who perceived it as an unlikely outcome (for them).

Behavioural commitment and sensemaking in identity construction

We suggest one reason issues of identity become so crucial is because they lead to, or follow from, choices with practical implications. To present oneself as a Robbie Williams fan requires little behavioural commitment. To present oneself as research-active will require a considerable effort if that presentation is to be credibly sustained. In other words, one will have actually to engage in the highly time consuming activity of research. Conversely of course, an academic may 'have' behavioural commitment by default e.g. by not getting involved in research, one may find it impossible to (re)present oneself as a researcher and will thus necessarily be engaged in sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and identity work so as to deal with the implications of this. For example, the 'research inactive' academic may choose to highlight 'research' and scholarship activity that underpin their teaching.

Identity work – what is done, what is said

Thus far we have explored the theoretical concepts which might shed light upon the identity work being done by our 'managers turned management academics'. Now we want to consider the discourses drawn upon in this ongoing identity work.. In doing so, we return to a consideration of the individual's perspective.

The search for credibility

Novice lecturers are often anxious about teaching, and central to this is anxiety is a concern to appear credible to one's audience i.e. students. For our participants, the source of greatest credibility at this early stage is their management experience and conversely their credibility is likely to be weakest in terms of 'academic knowledge'. This perhaps explains our observation that such staff are often most at ease with a student group often thought of as very demanding i.e. post-experience Masters/MBA students.

Gabriel (2003) argues that we might perceive two forms of authority (in the sense of 's/he speaks with authority') – the authority of expertise and the authority of experience. He suggests there is a currently prevalent discourse which privileges the authority of experience, and arguably this is now the dominant discourse in some settings. A good example of this might be the debate on the MMR vaccine, where evidence from substantial medical research was pitted against the evidence cited by parents of their experience, with the latter seen as more credible in many quarters.

For a management academic, there is a certain ambivalence in drawing upon one's own management experience. This ambivalence is captured in the idea of 'experience as currency' versus 'currency of experience'. In drawing upon a discourse of 'management experience as credibility', we noted phrases such as 'I used to work for a living', or 'back when I had a proper job'. Whilst this might be hoped to lend the speaker a certain grizzled, worldly-wise credibility, the past tense of course draws attention to the inevitability of diminishing returns in drawing upon increasingly outdated personal experience.

Since our participants' management experience initially represents their strongest suite, they were aware of the risk of moving away from their 'entry point' (i.e. the role for which their management experience was deemed to fit them). We might usefully draw a comparison with former athletes moving into media work. Their entry point is typically 'punditry' – offering comment on sporting events based upon their own experience of competing in that sport. To develop their careers, they must invariably seek to broaden their work to include other sports, or indeed other programmes entirely, but in doing so move away from their original source of credibility. Thus from 'I'm credible because I competed in this sport at the highest level' to 'I'm credible because I am a competent and experienced broadcaster'. Our participants identity work engages with the choices and risks surrounding similar transitions, particularly in the context of career progression.

To research or not to research

For our participants, a great deal hinges on the issue of academic research, the area in which they are least likely to have transferable experience, and also arguably the area in which it most difficult for them to develop and maintain credibility. Many academic posts require a track record of research publications, which is obviously the product of many years work. Whilst 'traditional' academics may serve this research apprenticeship at an early stage in their career, typically through undertaking a full-time PhD, our participants enter academia in mid-career and often taking on fairly substantial teaching and administrative workloads from the outset. For these practical reasons, a decision to become research active represents a major one for our participants. However, it also has implications for self-identity, as it represents a clear departure from their managerial 'roots', and there is therefore an issue of credibility – our participants expressed a great deal of trepidation about participating in the academic research 'game'.

From manager to worker

Our participants must deal with a relatively unusual transition, in that they will typically find themselves in a much more junior role within the organisational hierarchy than was the case in their managerial career. Having been managers or even board-level directors, they become mere 'workers'. There is a potential need for considerable identity work to 'reconcile' oneself to this revised status. Yet at the same time, one may have an enhanced status with a different 'audience' – students, the wider academic community, consulting clients etc. The potentially great discrepancy between these identities may lead individuals to manage their activities so as to reduce their exposure to the 'audience' which perceives the lesser/less appealing identity (Goffman 1963).

The emergent career academic

Consistent with the idea of academic career as 'lifestyle choice', some participants seemed initially fazed by the idea that notions of career might still pertain. The poet Michael Rosen commented that people seemed to assume that when poets meet they talk about poetry, whereas he suggest what they actually talk about is money. Similarly, non-academics might be somewhat surprised at the rich vein of careerism and political

machination in many university departments. (As a colleague dryly noted, ‘they fight so much because the stakes are so low’).

We argued that individuals construct identities through dialogue and social interaction in the context of others. Our participants reflected on actively seeking out opportunities to join or create new networks of relationships, or means by which they ‘connected’ their managerial past with their academic present. This included opportunities to convert social capital into lucrative consultancy, or involvement of guest speakers onto teaching programmes or university forums. There was evidence of establishing new ‘merged’ discourse communities with the explicit aim of creating ‘dialogue’ among academics and professionals as peers with common areas of interest, discussed from a plurality of perspectives.

Our participants were encouraged to think and behave ‘like an academic’ (Eraut, 1994). The language and mode of conversation encourages debates that ‘problematise’ and ‘deconstruct’ subjects from organisational politics to the performance of local football teams as anthropological artefacts for debate and contemplation, drawing from academic sources to frame and justify the analysis. In conversations one might be expected to refer to personal ‘areas of interest’, and demonstrate one’s academic linguistic prowess in articulating prospective research proposals that ‘fit in’ with the institutional research narrative. Contact was sometimes tentatively initiated with ‘published’ academics as a means of trying understand the rules of the research ‘game’, the mechanics and politics of ‘getting published’. The process of surfacing tacit knowledge in dialogue with colleagues is itself an element of the academic labour process leading towards ‘academic production’ i.e. publication.

‘To thine own self be true’?

Our participants face a difficult choice in terms of presentation of self. All are aware their management experience is valuable to them – in Business School-speak, it represents a source of competitive advantage which is not easily replicated (e.g. whilst our participants could in principle obtain PhDs, ‘traditional’ academics cannot obtain years of management experience). However, they are also acutely aware that career advancement is likely to be based upon acquiring new (academic) skills and knowledge. It is worth noting that career *advancement* was not necessarily a concern of our participants. It seems unlikely that an individual leaving a managerial career path to move into academia is doing so based on calculations of opportunities for career advancement of the traditional hierarchical variety. Our participants seemed to think of career *progression* – opportunities to do that which interests them. This is of considerable importance, since it means they may be likely to align themselves to organisational aims only in a relatively instrumental fashion.

By contrast, some participants were aware that their ‘management’ experience could serve a purpose by managing their peers and colleagues and providing access to an alternative career pathway, in which they effectively ‘revert’ to a management career.

'This isn't what I signed up for'

We noted that participants make a lifestyle choice in moving into academia. Whilst few expected dreaming spires and quiet afternoons nodding off in the common room, certain cherished notions about academic life seem to persist, focusing on independence and flexibility. The academic is perceived as having a degree of independence in terms of teaching and research, and also greater flexibility in terms of hours of work, annual leave etc. Yet within the UK university sector there seems to be a widespread view amongst academics that performance is increasingly micro-managed, hours of work are becoming extended and a generous leave entitlement is being implicitly eroded. Since complaining about work seems a feature of all occupational groups, we might not put too much store in this. However, our participants can at least make direct comparison between their current and previous roles. Whether or not the comparison is favourable to academia will obviously depend upon the individual's previous experience and the Business School in which they are working. It seems clear that in some cases participants found the 'academic lifestyle' closer than expected to the 'management lifestyle' they had left, begging the question – if the latter pays more, why remain in academia? Arguably the difference must still be sufficient, since few people returned to management. However, this issue of comparing managerial past with academic present seems to be an important aspect of identity work, even for those participants who were well-established in their academic careers.

Exit as identity work

In focusing upon ideas of self-identity, we tended to think in terms of managing identity in situ. However, we noted that a number of our participants had chosen to leave their current positions and work elsewhere, often to a different Business School, occasionally to a different department in the same university and very occasionally outside of academia altogether. No doubt many practical considerations will have played a part, but an element of identity work is also evident in these moves. Put simply, when the identity work required to continue to 'fit' in one's current environment becomes very great, it may make more sense to change one's environment.

Conclusion

Management academics shape their self-identity and self-presentation in the context both of prevailing discourses and their own biographies, and following Moore and Sonsino (2003), we suggest that how their identities 'shape up' is of critical importance to universities. As academics participate in 'communities of discourse' which go much wider than their current institution, it is possible for them to do identity work which to some degree runs counter to (or is at least not strongly consonant with) the intended aims of the institution. We might argue that in many instances this is a healthy state of affairs, eschewing that too-prevalent notion that management know best. However, we might also lament the apparent wastefulness of this scenario, in which individuals are left to construct a cautious, limited academic self-identity instead of being supported and

encouraged to draw upon their management experience in engaging in the full range of scholarly activity.

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Application Questions

1. What the implications for organisations of this anticipatory identity-shaping?
2. To what new identity might staff in your organisation be shaping their identities?