

# Introduction

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This is a book we have wanted to put together for a long time. We realised that, as academics, we have become so busy researching other people's working lives that perhaps we have overlooked our own. Frost and Taylor argue that being an academic "is a privileged life, but also a challenging one". They continue, "doubtless we will need to re-examine the rhythms of academic life anew in the future".<sup>1</sup> Given the far-reaching changes that have taken place in academia in recent years, and the likelihood of this continuing in the years to come, the time has come for this re-examination. This balance between 'privileged' and 'challenging' seems to have been lost, and the scales have been tipped too far in the challenging direction.

Being an academic has become more stressful, competitive, uncertain, ambiguous and, at times, overwhelming. Increasing student numbers and the introduction of tuition fees (in the UK at least) have changed students' expectations. There is a growing focus on value for money, which puts more pressure on academic staff. Students are increasingly being seen as customers, both by universities and by themselves, and this brings new pressures, which include academics competing between themselves to persuade students to enrol on their courses. Competition for resources has also intensified. Values of collegiality are under strain due to the weight of centralised and managerialist cultures where activity is assessed for quality, quantity, and impact. Scholars from around the world vie for publication in the top journals, apply for academic jobs in countries other than their home country, and are evaluated for promotion not just against peers in their own university or country but also against academics in a global context. Furthermore, academics are expected to build global networks, demonstrate innovation in their teaching, collaborate with researchers around the world, engage in activities and services to professional associations, engage with the commercial world, and contribute to a global academic community. Consequently, finding time to

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<sup>1</sup> Frost, P.J., & Taylor, M.S. (1996). Commentary. In P.J. Frost, & M.S. Taylor (Eds.), *Rhythms of Academic Life: Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia*: 485–496, at 485, 486. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

balance all the preparation, teaching and marking, and training for new technological learning resources, alongside an active research programme represents enormous challenges – both in terms of productivity, but also in terms of well-being. How, then, does an academic survive and thrive in this modern higher education arena?

This book explores some of the modern day challenges academics face in their jobs, the ways in which academic careers are changing, the reasons for these changes, and the impact that these changes have or may have in the future. The book adopts an international perspective to gain a broad understanding of the key issues and draws upon the work of many different authors from research-focused red brick<sup>2</sup> universities and from the newer group of universities whose focus is more on teaching than research. The writers explore these matters both theoretically and empirically, and draw upon different philosophies, designs, and approaches. All of the material in these chapters has been specially written for this book.

We chose to explore modern day challenges from three chronological phases within the working lives of academics: entering academia, during academia, and leaving academia. The first part of this book (entering academia) contains four chapters. This part commences with Chapter 1, which looks at the professional adaptation of early-career academics and identifies what it feels like to enter the profession. The early-career participants of this chapter describe their euphoric moments of securing their first academic job and how later an atmosphere of stress and pressure shrouds their working life. Challenges such as future career prospects and uncertainty, long hours and low pay are often of concern to those at the start of their academic career. These challenges of being an early-career academic continue to be evident in Chapter 2, which looks at what people who are new to academia can expect from their new careers. Real-life stories from four UK academics unfold, allowing for an understanding of how the academics morph their professional roles over time, illuminating the complexity of career decisions in academic careers. This issue of careers is expanded in Chapter 3, which explores why people with considerable employment experience in non-academic settings wish to change careers and enter academia. Moving to higher education after a career in industry may bring people a period of culture shock and adjustment on leaving the commercial world, as well as a significant drop in salary. Whilst this chapter highlights some of the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Red brick’ refers to universities of the UK which have traditionally been research focused and attract most of the governmental research funding. These are universities that were well-established prior to 1992, when the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 was enacted.

challenges of this transition, it also reminds us of the benefits of the profession. Chapter 4 is a reflective triologue of personal experiences, examining the nature of academia from three different perspectives and, therefore, offering a rounded view to those who might be considering changing careers. The three authors – a PhD candidate, a senior lecturer and a scholarly manager – share the expectations and perceptions of the nature of scholarship – something that they suggest we should all be engaged in.

The second part of the book is the largest, and it explores what happens during one's academic career. As will be seen, it is not all about 'talk and chalk'. Chapter 5 considers how academics can influence the career prospects of their students. With graduate employability being a fundamental focus of universities in the twenty-first century, the pressure to make students more employable falls onto the academics themselves, who are constantly reminded that they need to be innovative in their curriculum design and ensure employability is intrinsically linked to teaching and assessment. Chapter 6 examines how academics from foreign cultures attempt to integrate and adapt into new 'host' cultures. Working in cross-cultural educational settings is a challenge. Therefore, the chapter offers a four-phase model that highlights the transitory themes that influence and hinder the adaptation of immigrant academics to new working and social environments. Chapter 7 delves into an under-explored area, focusing on the challenges of administrative and management responsibilities that many academics undertake. Their responsibilities go beyond traditional teaching duties, and many academics now perform management roles such as programme leader, year tutor and personal tutor alongside their academic duties. Chapter 8 also looks at a non-teaching challenge; that of being an external examiner at institutions other than one's own. The chapter addresses real-life concerns, reasons why academics engage in external examining and gives advice on how to secure such a post, from the perspective of experienced examiners. Chapters 9 and 10 examine how academics supervise the work of others, focusing on doctoral students and research projects in turn. In particular, Chapter 9 takes a literature review approach to look at assessment processes surrounding PhD degrees. It reveals that the standardisation surrounding PhD assessment processes creates uncertainties for academics and candidates, adding to the pressure of the role. Chapter 10 considers significant changes in the supervisory role of an academic. The author, as an experienced academic, argues that the managerialist ideology that now characterises higher education institutions has played, and is likely to continue to play, the biggest role in how research supervision is provided to students.

By the time they reach Chapter 11, readers should have realised that academics have multiple priorities to balance – commitments to research and teaching; commitments to their department, faculty and field; and, most importantly, commitments to themselves, their friends, and family. Balancing multiple priorities and commitments can be challenging for academics and this chapter explores the tensions of academic working-life, including work–life balance and work–life conflict. Chapter 12 continues this theme, and further highlights how managing the competing priorities of teaching and research can be challenging. The modern academic has to juggle these often-conflicting priorities, while also working long hours, and this chapter illustrates how these issues are reflected in the literature.

Chapter 13 analyses the effects of academic life upon the emotional well-being of staff. Drawing on a novel methodology, this chapter uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to look at the role of academics' emotional labour in higher education, in the contexts of work intensification and a managerialist approach to education delivery. Emotional labour in academia is not well-illustrated in the literature, unlike other professions, yet this chapter reveals how commercialisation and managerialism in the sector can cause significant distress and lead to emotional dissonance. Indeed, the notion of New Managerialism Philosophy principles have greatly impacted on academic well-being generating some unseen pressures. This is discussed in Chapter 14, where the impacts of these pressures upon productivity, motivation and employee engagement are further examined.

The book continues with an assessment of the impact technology is having upon academics and the higher education sector in general. New technologies, the increasing digital literacy of students, and a move towards blended learning and online tutoring present academic staff with new challenges. Chapter 15 examines academics' reluctance to embrace technology and explores how this affects their work. In a similar vein, Chapter 16 shows how distance learning is challenging the traditional university approach to education. Evidence from a young, entrepreneurial university with a rapid expansion in distance learning education provision is presented, revealing the difficulties this imposes upon the work of academics. Chapter 17 explores the specific demands of leadership in academia and considers how the work of universities can be harnessed to provide leadership opportunities for staff, and how staff development might be linked to improvements in performance. Chapter 18 concludes the second part of the book and assesses how the work of universities can have unintended consequences for both staff and their institutions. The

chapter offers examples of unintended consequences from across higher education in the UK and the US.

The third and final part of the book is another short section, which focuses upon how and why people leave academia, and what happens when they do. Chapter 19 analyses the career strategies of groups of PhD students, some of whom remain in academia and some of whom leave university for other jobs. Chapter 20 explores the challenges posed by staff retirement. This ‘third age’ can challenge academics’ sense of self, but can also offer relief from the pressures of academia. In contrast, Chapter 21 ponders that it may not actually be possible to leave behind an academic career even if one has officially retired. Using the area of business and management, the chapter reveals the challenges that many institutions face when trying to retain key academic staff for as long as possible. It proposes a change, whereby universities can make use of the skills and experience of staff who are considering retirement by enabling them to work alongside other staff so that their skills may be passed on. Chapter 22, the final chapter in this section, and the one that concludes the book, agrees that it may not be possible to leave academia, but stresses the benefits an emeritus role can have for the academic themselves, as well as for their institutions and the wider profession.

This book could be viewed and interpreted in many ways. Perhaps it is the life story of a typical academic. Perhaps it is a series of personal reflections. Perhaps it is a source of advice and guidance for academics at different stages of their careers, drawn from the personal experiences of the authors. Perhaps it is all of these things. As editors and authors, our aim is to help you find a little piece of yourself in our chapters and also to remind our academic colleagues that challenges should not be kept behind closed university doors; they should be shared. It is time to reveal these challenges and try to change things for the better. We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as the authors have enjoyed writing it.

Mark and Marilena

