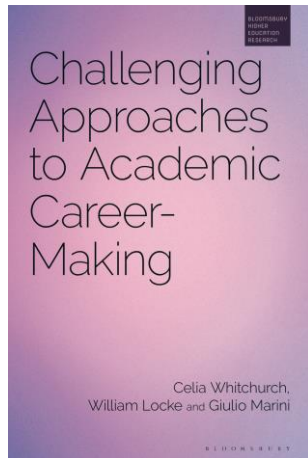


# Challenging Approaches to Academic Career-making

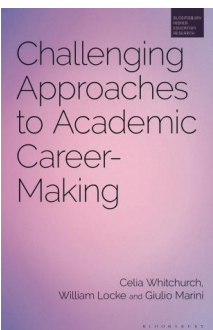
**Dr Celia Whitchurch**  
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**IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education**

**22 February 2024**



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- Dr Giulio Marini, Researcher, Department of Economics and Business, [University of Catania](#), Italy
- ESRC/Research England (funded CGHE Project 3.2 The future higher education workforce in locally and globally engaged HEIs)



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# Rationale for CGHE project 3.2

- More fine-grained study of academic careers needed:
- Gap between institutional career templates/individual experiences
- Definitions/categorisations, eg in HESA data, insufficiently nuanced (reflect broad trends but cannot show way roles are interpreted)
- Career models in the literature tend to be fixed typologies eg 'boundaried' (positional) and 'boundaryless' (portfolio) (Dowd and Kaplan 2005)
- Tend not to account for general breakdown of positional careers
- How individuals address challenges/setbacks on career paths
- Impact of individual hinterland

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# Conduct of project 2017/18 to 2019/20 (I)

- Interviews in eight UK institutions with eight individuals in each (2017/18)
  - Institutions chosen according to geographic region, type and disciplinary profile: England 5; Scotland 1, Wales 1, Northern Ireland 1
  - Russell Group 3; pre-1992 2; post-1992 2; post-2004 1
  - In each institution: 8 individuals, including the director of HR, a PVC, and 6 individuals undertaking academic work (3 teaching and research, 1 teaching-only, 1 research-only, 1 learning support)
  - Two institutions offered more than 8 interviewees therefore total of 69
- Majority in mid-career on open-ended contracts (6 were fixed term [4 RF, 2 Lecturer]) Average age 45

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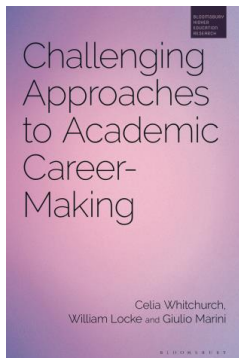


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# Conduct of project 2017/18 to 2019/20 (II)

- Analysis of careers based on 49 not having senior management team roles (44 academics; 5 learning support professionals)
- 3 respondents (lecturer/senior lecturer) were part-time
- Of academics: Humanities 12, STEM 12, Social Sciences 20
- 65% female, 35% male
- 20/49 had worked outside higher education, evenly spread across institutional type
- Repeat interviews with 39 academic staff, who agreed and were available, to pick up career development (2019-2020)
- Retention rate of 80% in second round; 15 had been promoted; 4 had left system (2 retirements, 1 redundancy, 1 to private sector); 2 fixed-term had become permanent

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# Interviewees by employment category

	First round of interviews (2017-2018)	Second round of interviews (2019-2020)
Middle managers e.g. heads of school and department	9	8
Teaching and research staff	28	22
Teaching-only staff	2	2
Research-only staff	5	4
Learning support professionals	5	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>39</b>

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# Initial categorisation of approach to careers

- Initial categorisation according to predominant approach (majority of participants displayed more than one)
- **Mainstream** (28%) (individuals placed emphasis on formal structures and timelines, focusing on activities deemed to be most valuable) (79% in the five pre-1992 universities) [28% figure demonstrates rationale for study]
- **Portfolio** (39%) (individuals cumulatively gather academic and associated experience, with a more open approach to the future) (68% in the five pre-1992 universities)
- **Niche** (33%) (individuals prioritise personal interests and strengths, moulding their activity so as to achieve a positioning that is comfortable and rewarding, but may also be used for 'career credit') (56% in post-1992 and post-2004 universities)

# Theorisation of roles/careers in HE

- ***But a static categorisation - only the Portfolio category begins to capture the fluidity of a career, whereby different approaches may dominate at different times, reflecting ongoing adjustments***
- Furthermore, institutional career structures tend to be linear and assume unitary direction of travel
- But individuals may hold on to more than one approach to their careers, at a single point, or over a period of time
- In practice, individuals interpret institutional progression criteria and policies in dialogue with themselves, and the social structures that they occupy (Archer's 'morphogenetic' process (Archer 2000))
- Therefore there can be spatial (vis-a-vis type of activity) and temporal dimensions to enacting a career, as adjustments are made

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# Conceptual framing - career scripts

- Fluidity of approaches described via three 'career scripts', which can vary over time and according to circumstances:
- ***Institutional scripts*** driven by formal career structures eg promotion criteria; performance review; work allocation models; visible/quantifiable measures
- ***Practice scripts*** driven by activity associated with professional practice settings and requirements eg health/social care, journalism/media, policing/probation services, humanitarian/non-governmental organisations
- ***Internal scripts*** driven by personal strengths, interests and commitments, work-life balance; articulated via eg informal conversations, personal development plans

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# Institutional scripts

- Individuals focus efforts on achieving formal requirements for career advancement (Archer's condition of "morphostasis" - enacting a prescribed role)
- Pragmatic decisions about the balance and focus of activity
- Prioritising activities most likely to benefit next role/promotion
- "I've just been given a lot more administrative responsibility... So I tried to ask to drop some of those roles to take more time to do the research, but instead they said 'oh no, you need to do that too', do those roles even better to demonstrate your eligibility for promotion, [so] I'm going to be more selective about what I take on" (lecturer, science, female, pre-1992 Russell Group university)

# Practice scripts

- Individuals maintain professional capital outside the university, in practice settings, using credentials/contacts to enhance academic activity [+ possible opt out]
- More towards “morphogenesis” end of spectrum - the individual empowered as “actor”
- “My role... is to bring lots of different pieces of data... into one place and look at policy relevant landscape designs for [plant based industry]... [to] maximise conservation and environmental issues... I think a lot of [applied scientists] see themselves as academics who crossed the boundary into practice... I see myself as an academic, but only sort of 50% academic” (lecturer, applied science, male, pre-1992 university)

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# Personal scripts

- Contextualise a role/career within a person's sense of themselves - strengths, interests, relationships, aspirations, and playing to these (Archer's "morphogenesis" - the individual empowered as "actor")
- Represent an individual's effort to maintain eg lifestyle choices, work-life balance, outside commitments
- "I am doing something that I don't dislike... I've got kids, I need to be home, it's convenient... I can be a big fish in a small pond..., the money is good for what I have to do. I don't have any management responsibilities... People know me here... They know what I do, my strengths and weaknesses" (reader, social sciences, male, post-2004 university)

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# Impact of scripts - approaches to a career may vary

- Scripts may vary over time and do not necessarily represent fixed categories to which individuals can be assigned
- Although an individual may have a dominant script at any one time, this may change to meet different circumstances
- Scripts can therefore reflect a spectrum of positionings over time
- Of the 39 people who were interviewed twice, dominant scripts had shifted towards Institutional (15 to 22 individuals) and Internal (12 to 14), and away from Practice (12 to 3), possibly as a result of eg aiming for or achieving promotion (1/3), focusing on the 2021 UK Research Excellence Framework or settling into a bespoke role

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# “Misalignments and disjunctures”

- Scripts can also be used to navigate “misalignments and disjunctures”:
- Workload models - innovative work often not fully recognised eg in relation to online/digital learning; learning support
- Standard contracts/job profiles - 40% teaching, 40% research, 20% administration/knowledge exchange - do not necessarily reflect reality
- Inappropriate promotion criteria eg non-social scientists lacked background to pursue pedagogic research to achieve promotion on a teaching track; belief that promotion on a teaching track more difficult
- Mismatches in departmental affiliation after restructuring eg historian, psychologist and archaeologist in law department (with implications for eg colleagues, research partners, career advice...)

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# The “concertina career”

- As a result of adaptations, individuals adopt ‘concertina’ career movements over time and space using different career scripts eg:
- Speeding up or slowing down of career progress
- A different focus at different times: “you have to play a long game... where you choose which bits of the puzzle you can concentrate on at any one time” (reader, creative arts, female, post-1992 university)
- From eg activity to achieve promotion to family commitments
- Extension of academic space eg pastoral support, employability, online learning, professional practice, public engagement
- Extension of personal space - eg humanitarian/voluntary work, professional networks, social media, family commitments

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# Conclusions

- Gap between formal institutional pathways and practice of a career
- Fluid academic career patterns, using different career scripts
- 'Hidden' activity, outwith job descriptions and workload models eg pastoral support of students, research by t-onlys, teaching by r-onlys
- Progression not necessarily a linear trajectory
- Significant movement in and out of higher education (1/3 to 1/2)
- Written promotions policies likely to be generic - require interpretation
- Need for recognition of extended activity for promotion/progression purposes, and belief in this process by academic staff
- Critical role of line managers/mentors in achieving this - presenting activity in ways that fit institutional criteria

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