‘Don’t call me an academic’: Professional identity and struggles for legitimacy within the vocational field of Events Management higher education.

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Abstract

Events Management is a relatively new subject within universities, and is positioned as a vocational field with links to industry and practice. This paper considers the role of the academic within Events Management higher education, and how individuals within this field position themselves and make claims to legitimacy. Drawing on interviews with 16 Events Management academics in the UK, we identify three narrative strategies adopted by individuals in this field as they position themselves in relation to academic and professional identities. The three narrative strategies identified – the anti-academic, the traditional academic and the blended professional – illustrate the precarious and often unstable identities of those within vocational subjects. Individuals within Events Management experience difficulty in terms of both their professional and academic identities, and may rely on a mixture of both traditional (e.g. research and teaching) and industry metrics in their claims to status and legitimacy.

Keywords: academic identity; Events Management; higher education; narratives; professional identity; vocationalism

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1. Introduction

Higher education in the UK has been experiencing prolonged and dramatic change over the last 20 years. Increases in student numbers and the associated rise in costs to governments have been accompanied by a radical change in the philosophy of universities (Burnes, et al., 2014). The 'golden age' of collegiality, autonomy and curiosity-driven knowledge and research, whether real or imagined, has been firmly replaced by new public management systems that focus on employability and audit, in which the student is positioned as consumer and universities as tools to service the economy (Ek et al., 2013; Clarke & Knights, 2015; Nabi et al., 2016). This places the academic, one of the key workers within this system, in a tenuous position of uncertainty and instability. Subject to many varieties of surveillance and audit, including student satisfaction surveys, league tables, and research and teaching evaluation exercises, studies show that "academic identities have been rendered ever more fragile by the proliferation of these increased controls and performative demands" (Knights & Clarke, 2014, p.339). What it means to be 'an academic' in the contemporary UK higher education context is unclear, leaving individuals within these roles feeling vulnerable and stressed.

This environment of uncertainty is further complicated by differences in ethos and status between different higher education institutions and different academic disciplines and subjects. Expansion in higher education has opened up opportunities for more people to gain high-level qualifications, and has brought many previously 'non-academic' subjects, like Nursing, Teaching and Business Studies, into the world of universities (Findlow, 2012). This has contributed to the goal of widening participation in higher education, but, alongside neoliberal education reforms and the combined introduction of fees for students and reduced government funding, has increased the divide between different types of university, subject and discipline (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Academic roles and identities are often framed in relation to the dual activities of research and teaching, with the former granted primacy within individual careers and departments (Fitzmaurice, 2013). For academics based within 'new' universities and subjects, particularly those that sit under the label of vocationalism and with relatively recent history within the academy, assuming an academic identity may be particularly challenging and uncomfortable as they strive for legitimacy and space within the academic environment that prioritises disciplinary knowledge and research-related achievement (Medcalf, 2014).

In this paper we consider professional identity within a 'new' academic subject at a 'new' university. Events Management is a relatively recent addition to higher education provision, with the first undergraduate course in the UK appearing at Leeds Metropolitan (now Leeds Beckett) University in 1996 (Bowdin et al., 2011). Since then, the portfolio of courses has grown and diversified significantly.

For an illustration of the growth in UK Events Management education over the last twenty years one only has to look at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) course listings. For the 2019/20 study year, the service lists 430 Events Management courses from 109 UK providers at undergraduate level, and 48 courses from 27 providers at postgraduate level (UCAS, 2018). The expansion of provision precipitated the formation of the Association for Events Management Education (AEME) in 2004. The reasons for the growth of interest in Events Management courses are multiple, but principally, according to Bowdin et al. (2011), it is due to a professionalisation of the industry in general. Indeed, until relatively recently, events have been seen as part of hospitality, tourism, leisure and recreation industries, or as a support service to businesses. However, the environment is changing and the events industry is emerging in its own right. In the past decade or more, events management has shifted from being a field of dedicated and resourceful amateurs to being one of trained and skilled professionals (Bowdin et al., 2011).

The large number of events management-related courses, and the variety of providers offering such educational provision, illustrates the thriving market for events management education in the UK. The vast majority of these courses are situated within 'new' universities, predominantly ex-polytechnics with relatively weak traditions of research, and with low status within the hierarchical system of UK higher education. Events Management is classed as a vocational subject, but unlike other long-established vocational courses such as Teaching and Nursing, has no external validation by its associated industry/profession. The vocational aspects of Events Management as a subject are maintained via informal links with industry and practice. As with Business Studies more broadly, Events Management has no clear disciplinary allegiance and staff teaching within these departments come from a variety of practical (industry) and academic backgrounds, including Sociology, Marketing and PR, Economics and Leisure Studies among others. As an emerging subject, Events Management also has relatively weak research traditions and theoretical underpinnings, drawing heavily on other subjects and disciplines, including Leisure Studies and Tourism (Rojek, 2013; Dashper, Fletcher and McCullough, 2014; Spracklen, 2014; Fletcher, Snape, Carnicelli and Lawrence, 2017; Liburd, Mihalič and Guia, 2018). As such Events Management offers a very different environment within which individuals construct academic and professional identities to the more traditional disciplinary context of many universities and departments. The local specificities of being an academic within such a newly formed subject area have profound effects on how academic identities are produced, performed and maintained. Individuals struggle to position themselves and their practice in relation to both industry and academia, against the precarious background of constant change and insecurity that characterises the contemporary context in the UK and many other nations.

We begin with a brief discussion of research on academic identities before moving on to present the methods and context of our study. Using narrative techniques we go on to explore various ways in which individuals make sense of themselves and their professional identities within the vocational context of an Events Management department in England.

2. Academic identities

There is a growing literature that considers the notion of academic identities, understood as the "ongoing construction of a coherent personal and professional narrative … interweaving many narratives to create the perceived or ideal identity presented to others" (McNaughton & Billot, 2016, p.4). Academic identity is an ongoing process through which individuals attempt to present themselves in relation to a variety of available discourses within academia, their subject or discipline, their institution and their department. Individuals thus have some agency to choose how they present themselves to others and in different contexts, but are also limited by the discourses available to them and the structural constraints of their position. Therefore we understand academic identity to be both an individual choice and performance, and as constrained by broader structural conditions. Such identities are "part of the lived complexity of a person's project and their ways of being in those sites which are constituted as being part of the academic" (Clegg, 2008, p.329).

There are many norms and shared values which are often cited as being necessary facets of academic identities. These include notions such as academic freedom, collegiality, truth seeking, autonomy, peer review, critical self-evaluation and professional judgement (Clegg, 2008; Trede et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2013). Being an academic is tied to both teaching and research, although the differential status of these core activities is widely acknowledged (Fitzmaurice, 2013). Academics often distinguish between 'real' work – research and, to a lesser extent, teaching – and other work – predominantly administrative and managerial tasks that form part of the audit culture and bureaucratisation of contemporary forms of university management (Ylijoki, 2013). There are numerous enjoyable aspects of academic work that contribute to a positive sense of self and professional identity, and encourage many to see being an academic as more than just a job and rather as a way of life (Fitzmaurice, 2013). The variety of academic life is seen as stimulating, and academic identities are constituted through diverse and often creative activities (Gough, 2014).

At the same time, however, changes in the wider higher education environment impose significant constraints on these enjoyable aspects of academic life. In addition to the managerialist tasks alluded to above that impose significant time pressures on academics and take them away from more fulfilling

aspects of their roles, academics report being under intense pressure to 'produce' and to achieve more – higher student satisfaction results, increased research income, more publications in highly ranked journals – and suffer anxiety about their perceived underperformance in one or more of these areas (Archer, 2008). Knights and Clarke (2014) point out that identity is always linked to insecurity as it is dependent on the judgement and validation of others, and this can never be controlled or predicted. Academics may be particularly vulnerable to such insecurities due to the constant scrutiny and potential for criticism and rejection inherent in the academic role and exemplified through the process of peer review. Therefore, academic identities are fraught with tensions between different priorities, expectations and intense pressures, and the idealised notion of an academic as engaged in fulfilling and stimulating intellectual work may be increasingly unreachable.

Clarke et al., (2013, p.7) argue that "[e]ach discipline has its own concept of success as a vehicle for prestige", and so context is very important for understanding academic identity. Jawitz (2009) points out that both the discipline and the institution play an important role in the development of academic identity, and the relationship between research and teaching impacts on the nature of academic work, and hence academic identity. Within vocational subjects, such as Events Management, this relationship is a contested issue. As many vocational subjects have become an integral part of higher education they have come under pressure to become increasingly 'academic' in order to justify their position, through more active engagement in research (Ek et al., 2013). Individuals within vocationally-oriented subject areas often come from more diverse backgrounds than those within more traditional discipline-based areas, and include both industry practitioners and those with PhDs and formal academic credentials. This leads to a blurring of the notion of academic identity within such subject areas. Individuals with industry backgrounds may be highly regarded by students, and gain prestige from their practice-based experience, but may feel they lack status and legitimacy within academic circles (Jawitz, 2009; Findlow, 2012). Those with more traditional academic backgrounds and PhDs may have credibility within academic structures, but their knowledge may be seen as less relevant by students and some of their more practically-oriented colleagues (Ek et al., 2013). Therefore, as well as suffering the same anxieties and pressures reported above, individuals within vocational subjects may feel additional competing demands to be both academically rigorous *and* practically oriented in relation to their vocational domain. Whitchurch's (2009) concept of the 'blended professional', that is, someone who crosses internal and external institutional boundaries, creating a third space between professional and academic domains, was developed in relation to university professional staff but may also have relevance to understanding the professional identities of academics in vocational subjects. Whitchurch (2009) argues that blended professionals are able to capitalise on a sense of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' entirely to either professional or academic domains, often working in what she

terms “ambiguous conditions” (p.408). Academics in vocational subjects may feel similar instability in relation to belonging (or not), and often have to work in such ‘ambiguous conditions’, negotiating space and credibility within both academic and professional/industry contexts. This has implications for the construction and performance of academic identities, as we discuss below in relation to the vocational subject of Events Management.

3. Research approach and context

In order to try to understand how academics in the vocationally-oriented subject of Events Management construct their professional identities we adopted a narrative approach because “academics make sense of events and themselves by absorbing, telling, negotiating, reshaping and co-creating stories” (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013, p.1137). Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that we make sense of and give meaning to our lives through stories, and so analysis of the stories used in different contexts is revealing of the dominant discourses that pervade that setting (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Trahar, 2009). Sparkes (1999, p.20) argues that “stories are both personal and social at the same time” as the stories an individual can tell about themselves are restricted by the stories available to them and culturally shared conventions about story-telling, listening and language. Therefore narratives help construct a community, in this case one of academics within a specific vocational subject, and enable individuals to position themselves in relation to that community. As such narratives can be seen to have normative power, helping to construct what is acceptable or not, valued or not, within a community (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Narrative analysis can reveal the power of discourses within a specific context, so “the analysis of narratives contributes to understanding how discourses are translated into individual and institutional practices” (Magalhães & Veiga, 2015, p.316).

We were interested in exploring the ways in which individuals within Events Management make sense of their professional identities, within a context that attempts to be both ‘academic’ and practical/vocational. As academics within this field ourselves, we were aware of some of the tensions that exist between the vocational and theoretical aspects of this subject area, and of some of the difficulties we and our colleagues experience when trying to position ourselves within the academy, and in relation to the events industry. We therefore decided to interview some of our fellow events academics about their experiences and understanding of their professional identities. There are some limitations to researching a context within which one is closely embedded, such as issues of trust, power, and being too close to a situation or phenomenon to be able to analyse it effectively (Labaree, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Fletcher, 2014; Dimmock, Weeks, Ashton-Hay, 2019). However, we agree with Knights and Clarke’s (2014) argument that, in addition to advantages of access and shared

understanding, if we as academics can research and critique other organisations and professional contexts, why not our own?

We conducted interviews with 16 different academics from a large Events Management department in a 'new' university in the north of England.[1] Ethical approval was sought beforehand, and all participants signed a consent form. All our colleagues in the department at the time knew about the research project and our research aims, and were assured that participation was voluntary and their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. The case study institution is an ex-polytechnic with a strong profile of vocational higher education and an emerging research culture. We selected participants at different stages in their academic career, some with an industry background, some from a more traditional academic route, and some who straddled industry and academia. Of these participants, there were 11 Senior Lecturers, three Principal Lecturers and two Readers. Interviews were undertaken by ourselves, both of whom were Senior Lecturers at the time and two other colleagues; a Senior Lecturer and Professor respectively. As we were including our own colleagues within our research we tried to be aware of issues of power and status and attempted to match interviewer and interviewee in ways to facilitate open discussion. For instance, where interviewees had a responsibility over us - for example one of the Principal Lecturers was our line manager and was responsible for our deployment and annual performance review, and the Readers were partly responsible for guiding our research agendas - we felt it most appropriate for the Professor to lead these interviews. Beyond this, interviewers and interviewees were 'matched' based on their knowledge of one another and their working relationship, such as teaching on the same modules.

The ethics of narrative research are complex, and were further exacerbated in this study by our working relationships with our participants. Ethical principles are relational and contingent, and we endeavoured to be mindful of issues of confidentiality, power, trust, and voice at all stages of the project (Adams, 2008). We have attempted to protect anonymity by changing personal details, merging stories and being reflexive throughout, but we remain aware that the 'ownership' of a story changes in the telling, in that what was once the participant's story becomes a co-constructed narrative that only we, as researchers, have the power to analyse and present (Josselson, 2007). Therefore the narrative frameworks presented below, whilst developed through conversation with our participants, are of our construction and represent our understandings of identity production within this context.

Interviews lased between one and a half hours and two and a half hours and took place in a location chosen by the participants (offices or university café). They were all transcribed and then subject to thematic analysis, based on Reissman's (2008) typology of narrative analysis. Therefore we

concentrated on *what* was said, rather than how it was said and performed in interaction during the course of the interview. We identified three narrative strategies that Events Management academics used to make sense of their professional identities within and beyond the academy. In the next sections we present these narratives, using examples from our data to illustrate how these storylines are employed for different purposes. The unit of our analysis was the narratives, not the individual participant, and so one individual may have made use of several of these narratives within the course of the interview, depending on the issues being discussed (see Yliijoki and Ursin, 2013). The presentation of the narratives below is thus drawn from several interviews and participants, and represents the dominant strategies used by professionals in Events Management education, as they try to construct coherent and legitimate identity(ies) within this vocational field. We have provided limited contextual background about the participants quoted, but have kept this deliberately general to protect anonymity.

4. Findings

We identified three dominant narrative strategies which participants deployed at various times, and for different purposes: the anti-academic; the traditional academic; and, the blended professional.

4.1 *The anti-academic: 'Don't call me an academic'*

Within this narrative, participants expressed discomfort with the label 'academic', and tried to distance themselves from what was seen as an archaic and irrelevant professional identity which has little resonance with experiences within a vocational subject like Events Management:

> *If people call me an academic I turn around and say 'I'm not really an academic' because I don't see myself as an academic. For me, I don't prescribe to the academic bullshit, as I call it. I see the wealth in research but I don't understand the way it is pushed forward as being the be-all and end-all and the most important thing we should be teaching our students, because I don't think it is. For me, I think that traditional academics sit around and use lots of big words and like to hear the sound of their own voices and go round in circles and don't get anywhere and that's just accepted in academic life. And I'm like, 'really?!' In industry it's not like that, it's about getting jobs done, whereas I feel like with the university we have the same discussions year after year and nothing moves forward and that's very frustrating.* (Participant A, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, not currently studying for a PhD)

Within this narrative frame, 'academic' was not seen as a positive or powerful identity. In traditional disciplines, identifying as an academic is relatively unproblematic, and claims to status and legitimacy are built around research outputs and income and, to a lesser extent, teaching; key facets of the academic role. For many within the vocational field of Events Management, such claims to status are problematic as some do not have PhDs and strong research credentials. The idea of the traditional academic is challenged and belittled, as rather than a focus for identification and a claim to power, it is a source of insecurity and alienation:

> *I do a lot of work with industry. I travel a lot, so I get my status not out of being an academic in that sense. I never say 'I'm an academic', I never say that. Because immediately there's a heap of judgement that happens when you say that, well to the people I care about. And I have it too, I can't stand the word. I think the word's wrong, because you say 'oh that's academic, that's only academic'. What do you mean? You mean it was irrelevant, you mean it was hypothetical, you mean it has no basis in reality. So 'academic' is a problematic word for me, I never use that word.* (Participant B, Female, Principal Lecturer, industry background, currently undertaking a PhD)

Rather, within this narrative status claims are linked more with industry and practitioner roles, reinforcing the importance of the vocational over the theoretical. Claims to power and legitimacy are strongly tied to practical experience and industry links. This was seen as important for 'kudos' in front of students, who were perceived to value hands-on experience over theoretical knowledge and expertise:

> *It gives you kudos in front of the students. When I stand in front of a lecture theatre full of students I can hold my head up and go 'Yeah I can tell you what the book says but I can also tell you what happens realistically as well'… Students love stories of what it's like. The best lectures I've ever taught have been where I'll be talking about behaviour or how should we fundraise or some donor pyramid or something that's come out of something, and then I will say 'I'm going to tell you a story' and the story will be woven into my own experience of doing something, and if that was a case study I could still use it, but it wouldn't have the same resonance as saying to a group of students 'I was on this, I did that'.* (Participant C, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, not currently studying for a PhD)

When the traditional academic identity was seen as alienating, exclusionary and inaccessible (usually due to lack of research expertise and credentials), it was delegitimised in a vocational context:

> *I have read loads and loads and loads of stuff and there's some stuff where I go, 'That is crap! And did the person who wrote that actually ever even go to an event, never mind run one?!' And other stuff you read and you go, 'You are just writing this because it's different from what so and so says, but again, do you actually know what you're talking about?' But then reading is not experience. You're not getting experience from reading a case study on an event. How much can you get from reading a case study of an event? How much can you get from reading? I don't think reading something about the industry exposes anybody, in any great depth, to the beast that is the events industry. I think you need to be in there, you need to have attended events, you need to have understood maybe a bit about the operational aspects of an event to really get to grips with what we're upskilling our students to go into.* (Participant C, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, currently undertaking a PhD)

The practical, industry-focused aspects of professional identity are a claim to power and legitimacy within a vocational context, but also used as a means of differentiating some participants from their colleagues whose professional identities are more closely aligned with traditional notions of the academic:

> *Students will tell me that some of those PhD holders, their lectures are awful because they've no idea of what examples they can use and put up against the theories they're spouting. That is where they get exposed.* (Participant E, Male, Senior Lecturer, industry background, PhD)

There was a sense of 'us' – the anti-academic practitioner – and 'them' – the traditional academic – within this narrative frame:

> *I think there is a divide and I think also there are now pressures on the, if you want, non-PhD/non-research camp such that they're worried about where their career might progress to. I think some of them feel quite threatened. . .* (Participant E, Male, Senior Lecturer, industry background, PhD)

This sense of feeling threatened exposes the vulnerability participants often feel in relation to their status and position within the university and the wider academy. This is set in the context of changing priorities of the university, within a highly-competitive higher education field in which traditional academic metrics, usually related to research, are scored, audited and explicitly valued:

> *There is more pressure now than there used to be. If my job was advertised now I wouldn't get it. I wouldn't get interviewed, there's the pressure.* (Participant F, Male, Senior Lecturer, industry background, not currently studying for a PhD)

The anti-academic narrative frame was frequently deployed by participants in our study as a claim to power and legitimacy within the vocational subject field of Events Management. The anti-academic frame is based around practical, hands-on experience, and this is perceived to provide status in the educational role, especially in front of students. This framework is positioned in opposition to notions of the traditional academic, exposing a deep vulnerability in the anti-academic identity, which is experienced as a marginalised and threatened position within the neoliberal university.

4.2 *The traditional academic: 'Don't link me to Events Management'*

The second narrative strategy we identified draws on more traditional aspects of university and academic identities:

> *I'm an educator, a researcher. As an educator I teach and educate students and equip them with subject-related knowledge as well as wider knowledge. As a researcher I try to contribute to the improvement of knowledge and also try to link to the cutting edge with teaching, so research and teaching. I believe in research-linked teaching and always bring my research to teaching activities.* (Participant G, Female, Reader, no industry experience, PhD)

Within this framework, claims of legitimacy draw not on links with industry and practitioner experience, but on research and teaching, the traditional roles of the academic. These more traditional academic identities were a source of status and positive identity, explicitly separate from vocationalism and Events Management as a specific subject area. This strategy was deployed in order to illustrate how the individual conforms to wider traditional understandings of the respectable academic, one with a recognised disciplinary allegiance, even though they were currently based within a vocational subject area:

> *I don't really see myself as contributing to event management research particularly. When I publish I don't really publish in event specific subject journals. More in tourism, economics, management journals. I still think I'm an economist. And I'm happy applying the knowledge to this field but I think I will stick with my traditional, original background, which is Economics.* (Participant G, Female, Reader, no industry experience, PhD)

Events Management is a 'new' subject in the academy, with a recent history and associated limited intellectual status. The few targeted journals in the field are of relatively low status, and so when claiming a traditional academic identity, participants would do this in relation to more established fields, downplaying Events Management:

> *I find I increasingly talk about the fact that I teach Business Studies, I refer specially to Marketing and Strategy, I no longer talk about Events Management, to friends, colleagues, people I meet in general. People outside of our subject, I don't talk about Events Management, I talk about business. It's simpler for them to understand and, being frank, they probably value it higher.* (Participant H, Male, Senior Lecturer, industry background, not currently studying for a PhD)

There was widespread acknowledgement of the low status of Events Management within the university context. Being associated with Events Management would lessen the academic status of the individual:

> *I would say 'I'm a lecturer', but I'm not so sure about the Events Management bit. The response I've had from some people has made me hesitant about using 'Events Management' in the same breath. Their perception was that it was a Mickey Mouse degree, and it felt really insulting.* (Participant I, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, PhD)

Academia is built on status, hierarchy, differentiation and ideas about 'quality'. The audit culture of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[2] in the UK epitomises this, and drives those who seek to claim a professional identity as a 'proper' academic to adopt such metrics and markers of worth and value. Being associated with the low academic status of Events Management, as a relatively newly established and vocational subject, taught within low-status universities, exposes the individual academic to associated risks to their reputation and status. One way to address this was to dismiss the relevance of the subject area:

> *I don't know, I always have a healthy cynicism about Events Management if I'm honest, and tourism and hospitality. Sometimes I'll be at a dinner party and take the mick out of what we do. I'll say 'oh yeah, we're experts in shopping, holidays and parties', because ultimately I perceive my friends to think that… It's not English Literature, it's not, you know, Medicine, it's not Psychology, it's an emerging discipline and it will have cynicism.* (Participant B, Female, Principal Lecturer, industry background, currently undertaking a PhD)

Claims to status through association with traditional academic identities means downplaying, possibly even denying, links with the subject of Events Management. Within this narrative strategy, this was seen as necessary to align oneself with an academic identity:

> *I think it's ok to be like this [*to downplay links with Events Management*]. I think it's almost back to what we say about Events Management being kind of a combination of different subjects. And the people working in this field are from different backgrounds like Geography, Sociology or Management or Economics. So when they publish they probably, most of us, will apply the core subjects to these contexts. And when we choose where to publish we will probably publish in our own field. I mean journals related to our field. I think that is the general, very common phenomenon in this case.* (Participant G, Female, Reader, no industry experience, PhD)

The traditional academic framework was deployed in order to position the individual in line with more established notions of an academic, involved with research predominantly, and teaching as another (slightly less) important role. In order to be taken seriously in this, it was seen as necessary to downplay, even completely silence, any links with the vocational subject of Events Management, which was perceived as having low status in this frame.

4.3 *The blended professional: 'Call me what you like!'*

The final narrative strategy we identified resonates with Whitchurch's (2009) concept of the blended professional, who operates in a third space between professional and academic domains. Within this frame, participants were comfortable to align themselves with both academic and professional identities, recognising the value of flexibility in claiming status with different audiences and for different purposes, and within an individual career:

> *So I wouldn't describe myself as a career academic. I would say I'm someone with an academic career right now, and I think that's because of my career history, because my career history was always very mobile, moving between different jobs … At the minute I suppose I've got the best of both worlds because I am still active in what I do over the summer months and then I come back to academia in September.* (Participant C, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, not currently studying for a PhD)

This strategy was frequently deployed in a positive manner, recognising the value of academic-industry links and collaboration within the context of teaching Events Management:

> *Then you can be giving the student all the firepower that you've got. You've got industry experience recently, or current, because I think it's important for us as scholars to be engaged in our industry.* (Participant J, Male, Principal Lecturer, no industry experience, currently undertaking a PhD)

For those with less traditional academic/research backgrounds, this blended role was exciting and offered new opportunities that helped to diminish some of the anxiety and vulnerability they may feel within traditional academic contexts:

> *So I kind of thought ok, now it's time for me to check the research box and I'm going to start that by, well I'm not going to go for the PhD straight away, what I'm going to do is I'm going to see what happens if I go and speak at a conference, having never spoken at a conference before, or written anything at all. So I went to my first conference and it was amazing. I was like, 'God, these people actually think what I'm saying is useful, wow!'* (Participant C, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, currently undertaking a PhD)

As professionals within a vocational subject, many of our participants came from non-academic backgrounds, but were becoming increasingly involved in research, which was seen as a positive development:

> *Part of me would love to become an expert, to develop an expertise in something, so I am excited to start on my PhD, although I'm also slightly scared because it's a world I don't understand. I see it [*research*] as something that is important that we do… I'm not completely one way or the other, I think I'm probably a blend of the two, and certainly the more I study the more I probably veer towards the academic side from the practitioner side. But in no way do I think that the two are mutually exclusive.* (Participant L, Male, Senior Lecturer, industry background, currently undertaking a PhD)

This narrative strategy was thus deployed to show the power of vocational subjects to span the theoretical-practical divide:

> *We need to embrace everybody's skills, we need all the healthy bits. We need good teaching; we need good research; we need good industry links, to make the whole thing operate.* (Participant I, Female, Senior Lecturer, industry background, PhD)

Achieving this requires flexibility and a willingness to be adaptable in claims to power, status and identity:

> *I guess in terms of the whole academic and lecturer identity, I think you do have different identities when you're in this kind of position. You do have your different hats that you put on for different occasions.* (Participant M, Female, Senior Lecturer, no industry experience, PhD)

The blended professional narrative requires recognition of the need to wear different 'hats' with different audiences; with students as opposed to industry representatives, or to academic colleagues, or to management. Navigating this blend puts pressure on individuals and can be stressful:

> *For me, these roles are quite distinct. In one situation I act this way, and in another I act this way. Whenever I'm in a new situation and I need to get used to it, I'm thinking 'how do I take this? What angle am I taking here?' There's that weird adjustment period where you're a bit of all sorts until you figure out exactly what that situation requires. So it can be a bit strange sometimes.* (Participant M, Female, Senior Lecturer, no industry experience, PhD)

The blended professional narrative strategy is built on flexibility, adaptability and dialogue between industry and academia. Whilst usually presented as a positive position, it requires considerable dexterity and fluidity from individuals who constantly negotiate different facets of their professional identity in different contexts.

5. Discussion

The three narrative strategies outlined above illustrate various ways in which professionals/academics in the vocational subject of Events Management construct their professional identities, and lay claims to status. Much previous work on academic identities has focused on professionals whose status is tied predominantly to research (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Ylijoki, 2013), or more established vocational fields like Teaching and Nursing (Findlow, 2012). Our discussion here of Events Management academics illustrates another context for the construction of precarious academic identities, as these individuals operate in a low status, newly emergent subject area, with both weak academic underpinnings and non-regulated/formalised links to the associated industry. Events Management is a growing subject area, popular with students, but poorly established in the academy. Individuals working in this area thus struggle to negotiate professional identities as academics, as practitioners, or as a blend of the two.

The anti-academic was the most commonly adopted narrative strategy within our study. This illustrates the importance of embodied experience and professional expertise to identity claims within

vocational subjects, where practical engagement with industry (past or present) brings a level of status and legitimacy, particularly in relation to students. This framework is deployed in opposition to that of the traditional academic, indicating how more practically-oriented colleagues may feel vulnerable and exposed within the academy. The anti-academic narrative is thus an alternative claim to power, one that challenges the focus of academia on research and educational credentials, and draws instead on the application of knowledge in practical contexts. Yet the anti-academic narrative is fraught with vulnerability and insecurity, and so our participants also resorted to more established academic narratives as a way to stake out their legitimacy within the university's walls. In order to do this, the vocational and applied aspects of Events Management that are a source of pride and status in the anti-academic narrative, are downplayed, even denied. To claim legitimacy in traditional academic terms, Events Management academics disavow the subject, and associate themselves instead with established disciplinary bases in Sociology, Economics and Management etc. To be a traditional academic is thus to distance oneself from Events Management and from vocational subject bases in general. The third narrative strategy adopted by our participants was that of the blended professional, who recognises the importance of both traditional academic research, and vocational, applied experience. Identity as a blended professional sits well with the ethos of vocational higher education, as theoretical rigour, quality research, practical experience and application of knowledge all come neatly together. For some, this is an empowering identity, enabling them to embrace their practitioner past and their more academic future selves. However, the blended professional identity is complex, requiring fluidity and flexibility on the part of individuals, potentially causing stress and lack of focus and certainty about professional roles and selves.

Academics (and anti-academics) in vocational subject areas like Events Management thus find themselves caught between multiple discourses with divergent systems for according status and prestige. As Knights and Clarke (2014) argue, all academic identities are fragile and tenuous, subject to constant surveillance and appraisal, and to the vagaries of government policy, student satisfaction and ever-increasing marketization of higher education. Academics frequently feel inadequate on some measure of performance and exert enormous pressure on themselves to 'deliver', in terms of research, funding, publications, teaching, student support, 'impact', community engagement and so on. What it means to be an academic is thus contested, fragmented, perhaps even unattainable. Context is vital to understanding how these pressures play out within the lives of individual academics, subjects/disciplines, departments and universities (Clegg, 2008; Jawitz, 2009).

Our discussion here reveals that for academics within 'new' vocational subjects like Events Management, within UK higher education institutions, these competing demands frequently lead to feelings of vulnerability and confusion. Claims to legitimacy in relation to practical experience,

seemingly essential to vocationalism, often come at the expense of traditional academic legitimacy. Academic legitimacy requires the downplaying of vocationalism, often the outright denial of links with the subject area. Attempts to bridge the practitioner-academic divide hold promise, but put enormous pressure on individuals to wear multiple 'hats', shifting deftly between them as the situation demands. Consequently those based within such a context as Events Management often struggle to identify themselves as academics, and certainly as Events Management academics. For them, academic or professional, identity is fractured, tenuous and unstable.

In the context of Events Management, we are at the very beginning with these debates. The narratives presented in this paper represent a starting point, but we are mindful that they can only represent the reality of those working in one department in one university in the UK. The narratives we present may well be representative of other Departments in similar institutions in the UK, but then again, they may not. There is a need therefore, for collaborative work, which examines academic identities across different departments, institutions and countries. We have begun this in our ongoing research through a comparison between the institution reported on here and another UK institution, with different staff and student profiles and historical bases. This comparison not only examines the professional identity of academic colleagues, but also the identities and expectations of those studying an Events Management degree. In time, we hope to involve other UK and international institutions in a longitudinal study in order to continue the debate about what it means to be associated with a vocational subject like Events Management in the context of neoliberal higher education.

6. Conclusion

Academics working within contemporary higher education are subject to a barrage of competing demands and expectations that shape professional identities and experiences. Academics often experience their role as stressful and precarious (Knights & Clarke, 2014). For those within vocational subjects these pressures can be exacerbated by feelings of inadequacy in relation to academic credentials and/or vocational and practical experience (Findlow, 2012; Ek et al., 2013). In this paper we have considered how these pressures and competing demands affect the professional identities of academics within the vocational field of Events Management.

Our discussion here contributes to greater understanding of professional identities within contemporary higher education and the role of vocational subjects, like Events Management, within these contexts. The example of Events Management brings to the fore a group of professionals currently under-recognised within the literature on academic identities. Within Events Management,

as with many other vocational subjects relatively new to the academy, academic staff come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and with varying degrees of related professional experience. As a relatively new subject, Events Management has underdeveloped research traditions and weak disciplinary allegiances, and so academics in this field may struggle to carve out traditional academic identities in ways similar to colleagues in more established fields. At the same time, vocational links to the events industry are informal and less clear-cut than for some other vocational subjects, like Nursing or Teaching, which can provide individuals with strong professional identities and allegiances that are less clear for those within fields like Events Management. For academics within this kind of subject, constructing a professional/academic identity may be particularly complex, as claims to status cannot be unambiguously tied to either industry/professional field or to the academy in a traditional sense. Consequently professionals in fields like Events Management are constantly struggling for legitimacy and status.

Within such a context, claims to status always involve a disavowal of an aspect of professional identity – either the academic or the vocational. This contributes to feelings of vulnerability and instability, shared by all academics but perhaps elevated for those positioned in these 'new' vocational subjects. Unable or unwilling to fully occupy and lay claim to either an identity as 'academic' or 'practitioner', professionals within this educational field adopt multiple narrative strategies to claim legitimacy in different ways, different contexts and in relation to different audiences. The concept of academic identity is thus problematic for these individuals, and their sense of belonging, value and worth, both within higher education and in relation to their associated industry, is an ongoing project.

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[1] Some of these colleagues have subsequently retired, moved to another institution or left the profession.
[2] The REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. For more information see https://www.ref.ac.uk/