

The Presentation of Academic Identity at a Papua New Guinean University: Agency and Liminality in Postcolonial Higher Education

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Awareness of one's academic identity, and the confidence to actively shape this identity, are pivotal in navigating higher education.

The findings discussed here come from a wider study on the ways in which academic staff at one PNG university **present, construct, maintain and adjust** their situated **academic identities**.

Research findings on the **‘naming’** and **identification of oneself as an academic** – and the **use of alternate descriptions** – are presented, taking into account various ways of **‘being an academic’**, the terms lecturing staff use to describe themselves to their families, communities and personal networks, and perceptions of academic values and characteristics.

Postcolonial higher education and academic identity studies

This study focuses on role identity (Caza et al., 2018; Barrow et al., 2020), in this instance the role of ‘academic’, which is broader than a mere label (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2018).

Our approach accepts that academic identities are shaped by organisational, professional and personal influences but that individuals are far from passive in this process.

The research assumes that academics at DWU have agency and are actively engaged in ‘identity work’ (McLean & Price, 2016), defined as “...the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298).

That is, academic staff exert agency and choice in how they describe themselves and locate themselves as members or non-members of a group and how they wish others to see them (Billot & King, 2017).

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis, as follows:

Reasons for claiming or not claiming the description 'academic': teaching, knowledge and curiosity are presented as reasons for claiming the title whereas a lack of research is presented as the main reason for not claiming it or only half-claiming

Widespread use of alternate descriptions:
teacher, lecturer, facilitator, expert are terms more widely used, especially when talking to family or friends, whereas the word 'academic' can sound either too grand or appear meaningless

Professionalism: the need for academics to be professional is stressed in an abstract sense but, personally, some interviewees feel uncertain about the transition from a professional to an academic role.

Conclusions

In actively ‘shaping’ their role identities, the priorities asserted by DWU academics place value on the civic and cross-generational worth of teaching that stands in contrast to the valorisation of individual fame as a researcher (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991) in much Western higher education.