



# EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER PATHWAYS, TENSIONS, AND STORIES

Susan Gasson



GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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RESEARCHER PATHWAYS,  
TENSIONS, AND STORIES

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# EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER PATHWAYS, TENSIONS, AND STORIES

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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**Susan Gasson's** research focuses on research education and development, research collaboration and employability. Adopting qualitative approaches including narrative inquiry, her research has benefited from years spent working in higher education and building strong national and global networks. She managed the Research Students Centre at QUT for two decades before joining JCU Graduate Research School for five years. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and Adjunct Senior Lecturer with the Cairns Institute at James Cook University.

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As always, any errors or omissions are entirely mine.

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## INTRODUCTION

The most vulnerable part of today's research workforce, early career researchers (ECR) will become our future research leaders. They must navigate research roles, projects and work environments turbulently disrupted by the world around them. Rapid technological advances, geopolitical and environmental uncertainty and shifting interest and investment in research and researchers make their pathways increasingly tenuous (Guyer, 2024; Pham, 2023; Withers, 2019). Researchers, employers and policymakers will find resources in the following chapters to better support this vital cohort to meet our future local and global challenges.

Reading the book, you will find ECRs' stories of pursuing pathways, stories I collected as part of a narrative inquiry (Gasson, 2023). Researchers from Australia, Asia and the Americas who are now working around the world contributed to the study. My narrative inquiry analysis of their stories revealed tensions created by opposing expectations and opportunities. Exploration of these tensions in chapters of this book is grounded in the three narrative commonplaces – temporality (time), sociality and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), as shown in Table 1.1.

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**Table 1.1. Tensions, Chapters and Commonplaces (Time, Place and Sociality).**

**Chapter Tensions and Commonplaces**

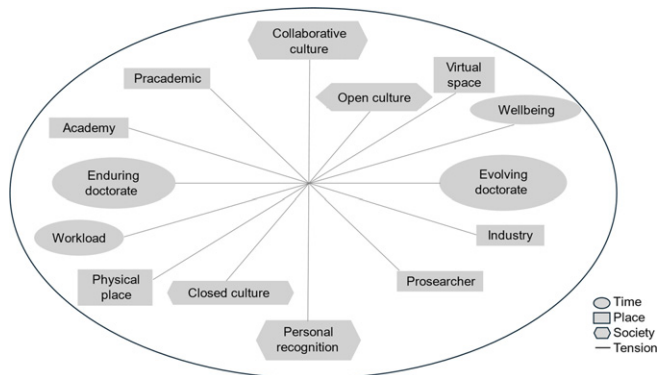
2	The enduring purpose of the doctorate	Time	The evolving role of the doctorate
3	The academic workforce	Place	The industry workforce
4	The Pracademic – doctorally qualified professional in academia	Place	The Prosearcher – doctorally qualified professional in industry
5	Open research cultures	Sociality	Closed research cultures
6	Personal recognition	Sociality	Collaborative culture
7	Workload	Time	Wellbeing
8	The virtual (work) space	Place	The physical (work) place

---

Fig. 1.1 shows the system of tensions ECRs face pursuing career pathways. Because this system is dynamic and interrelated, responses to one tension may create new opportunities or challenges in managing other tensions.

In each chapter, sometimes with co-authors, I define the opposing forces creating each tension. Then I share ECRs' stories and frameworks to reveal the impact of each tension on career pathways. Resources and strategies in the Your Story section at the end of each chapter are intended to inspire new career pathway stories. Table 1.2 introduces the ECRs whose stories are featured in the book.

In Chapter 2, I introduce you to the enduring purpose and the evolving nature of doctoral education ([Ruano-Borbalan](#),



**Fig. 1.1. Early Career Researcher Pathway Tensions.**

2022). Stories describe responses to shifting workforce needs and expectations, and features of the contemporary doctorate are considered using Notions of Time (Gasson, 2023). In *Your Story*, I show you how to use the Notions of Time framework to create more strategic career and workforce plans.

Mark Piccini and I explore the academy/industry pathway tension in Chapter 3. Stories are used to explore three trajectories – teaching and service innovator, research leader and portfolio engager – informing the pursuit of pathways (Gasson, 2023). In *Your Story*, resources are provided to strengthen career planning and management, aligning preferred trajectories with career expectations and developing researcher identities.

The tension between career pathways of doctorally qualified professionals in academia (i.e., the pracademic) and industry (i.e., the proresearcher) is examined by Wade Kelly and I in Chapter 4. Stories reveal experiences of striving for credibility, recognition and reward while boundary-crossing between the academy, industry and the professions. In *Your*

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**Table 1.2. Early Career Researchers (ECRs) Whose Stories are Featured.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Trajectory</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>Pracademic/ Proresearcher/ Boundary Crosser</b>
Alfred	Research leader	20+ years University academic and professional, Americas	Pracademic
Amy	Teaching and service innovator	20+ years Professional, multinational corporation, Americas	Proresearcher
Harry	Research leader	10+ years University academic, Asia	Academic
Jane	Research leader	10+ years professional then university academic, International	Pracademic
Lucy	Teaching and service innovator	5 years University professional and academic, Australia	Academic
Mark	Teaching and service innovator	5 years University academic, Australia	Academic
Ole	Portfolio engager	10+ years University academic and other research administration, International	Boundary crosser
Steve	Research leader	10+ years University academic, Asia	Academic

---

Story, resources are provided to align your developing researcher identities and career trajectories with job, team and employer expectations.

In Chapter 5, Stevanus Wisnu Wijaya and I consider the implications of pursuing careers in open and closed research cultures. The rise of open access (OA) publishing and its implications for building a researcher profile are considered. Stories and case studies reveal experiences of engaging in open and closed research cultures. In *Your Story*, resources are available to inform engagement in open and closed research cultures.

Laura Challman Anderson, Christine Bruce and I explore ways to engage in collaborative research and achieve personal recognition in Chapter 6. We use frameworks to explore the rewards offered by collaborative, competitive and cooperative cultures and ethical collaboration. In *Your Story*, leadership resources are provided for you to apply in gaining recognition for collaborative research.

Lauren Shaw and I examine the tension between workload and well-being demands in Chapter 7. Stories, informed by *Notions of Time*, reveal the strain and pressure placed on ECRs. In *Your Story*, we provide researchers, employers and policymakers with strategies for managing workload and sustaining a productive and healthy workforce.

In Chapter 8, I explore virtual spaces and physical places and their influence on your pursuit of career pathways. Stories explore the impact of emerging technologies and working from home on roles and responsibilities. Dynamic virtual spaces offer new tools, applications and platforms, enabling novel approaches and knowledge outcomes. Physical workplaces can enable higher levels of engagement, while home places can improve work-life balance. *Your Story* provides strategies for aligning places and spaces with personality types, life circumstances, roles and responsibilities and career pathways.

In Chapter 9, I consider ways forward using the key insights and resources presented in the book. The roles of

those invested in the success of ECRs are discussed. Finally, I clarify the place of tensions introduced in this book to the wider debate about the quality and quantity of ECRs pursuing career pathways.

The Epilogue describes where some of the ECRs, whose stories are featured in this book, are now.

Frameworks and resources offered in this book can assist you in pursuing a pathway to success. You may define that success as obtaining or retaining a job, enhanced job satisfaction, tenure, financial reward or advancement. Employers, policymakers and researcher developers may find strategies to meet the changing needs and expectations of the next generation of researchers.

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