



EMERALD POINTS

**PRACTITIONER,  
PROFESSOR,  
RESEARCHER,  
REFORMER**

Women's Atypical Stories

**JACKIE CARTER  
LINDA BAINES**



PRACTITIONER, PROFESSOR,  
RESEARCHER, REFORMER

Wow, what a book! As an atypical academic myself, this book truly hits home. The authors tackle topics that are rarely discussed, and I'm grateful to them for raising awareness while highlighting both the strengths that women with atypical academic careers bring to the field and the challenges they face. This book will resonate with anyone who feels they don't quite fit into academia, encouraging them to think differently and empowering them to reshape what it means to be an academic.

—*Professor Vanessa Higgins,*  
University of Manchester and UK Data Service

It is not often you get the opportunity read a book that so thoughtfully represents and empower the voices, stories and experiences of women in academia. Yet, the authors of this book beautifully articulate both the intersecting joys and pains that come with navigating academia as a woman. The authors narrate a compelling case for the 'atypical' academic career, which showcases the huge scale of work that is needed to ensure academic structures are embracing 'atypical' excellence to be truly fit for an inclusive and sustainable academic future.

—*Dr Arun Verma,* University of London

This book provides a fascinating insight into the world of professional working women and fully explores their journeys and experiences in or with higher education. The women have navigated non-traditional career pathways and atypical career trajectories in academic and related sectors, and have provided a lens onto the challenges, strategies and contributions of their evolving careers and lives.

Interviews with thirty women offer new insights into our understanding of the relationship between women's lives and their careers. The approach to data analysis gives voice to and authenticates the women's experiences and challenges. The authors have very cleverly foregrounded the women's voices and stories and have allowed the data to do the talking, making the accounts in this book honest, heartfelt and impactful. The accounts describe the often not straight-forward routes into careers in higher education, and this offers a substantial contribution to the body of research that focusses on gender equality and women in the workplace.

The book is also a useful resource for all women, whether they are seeking inspiration, information and opportunities, or not. The work is compelling and makes a significant addition for researchers and readers who want to

understand the lived experiences of becoming a higher education professional. Each chapter provides powerful accounts that achieve many aims, including highlighting the wide range of skills, knowledge and expertise that the women bring to their roles in higher education.

The authors decided not to include any theoretical underpinnings as part of the book, and this allows the women's voices to be heard loudly and clearly. The critical analysis of the women's experiences reflects the journeys of colleagues from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds, including under-represented groups like the working class. The book therefore has the potential to improve and build upon more inclusive approaches to supporting the recruitment and advancement of women from a diversity of backgrounds.

The book is a testimony of strength, resilience and determination. Much of what the women recount from their own experiences resonates with me and my own experience. I am a working-class academic who returned to education as a mature student, having left school early without any qualifications. Forging a career in higher education is tough at the best of times but if you come from disadvantage, under-representation, and if you struggle with imposterism and feelings of belonging, this makes the journey much more arduous and precarious. What these testimonies provide are inspirational and encouraging statements that act as visible positive role modelling, or as the authors prefer to say, 'torchbearing', lighting the way for other women to pursue careers, not just in the sector of higher education, but also in other areas.

—*Iona Burnell Reilly*, University of East London

Gorgeous and galvanizing, this book shatters the myth of the 'proper academic' and celebrates the women who refuse to fit its narrow mold. These are the torchbearers of the academy – positive disruptors whose stories reveal both the exhaustion of constantly having to justify themselves and the exhilaration of carving their own paths.

By turns uplifting and sobering, tender and fierce, it honours those who stay, those who leave, and those who redefine what an academic life can be. For anyone who has ever felt out of place in the university world, this book is both a mirror and a manifesto. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

—*Professor Christina Hughes*, Women-Space Leadership Limited

I wish I'd had this book when I began my own atypical academic-adjacent career. Underpinned by careful research, this authoritative work demonstrates the creativity and resilience of women working atypically in and with academia. The expert authors provide a fascinating insight into the diversity,

challenges, and rewards of women's scholarly careers. This book is essential reading for any woman considering or undertaking a career in or close to academia, and for anyone working with scholarly women.

—*Helen Kara, Independent Researcher*

This book is a gift. I can't wait to share it with the brilliant women in my world who are questioning whether there's a place for them in academia, because they feel late, lost, or "less than." Without glossing over the real challenges of forging an atypical path, these 30 stories offer hard-won insights, real strategies, and the kind of solidarity that can reignite a dream. Masterfully edited and deeply human, this collection is both a balm and a beacon. Thank you, Torchbearers.

—*Agnes Vajda, Global Education & Leadership Coach,  
ECPC. Former Regional Director,  
Europe – Institute of International Education (IIE)*

As higher education refocuses its purpose and profile in light of multiple challenges, *Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women's Atypical Stories* provides a timely insight into non-traditional pathways in academic and related sectors. These professionals – often labelled as exceptions – are increasingly recognized for being pivotal as movers and shakers, agents prepared to positively disrupt institutional hierarchies that are intimidated by the opportunity to embrace risk.

This text seeks to explore the consequences of job titles and descriptions and does so from the lived experience(s) that while diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives are making a difference, they often do so at the margins. Employing semi-structured interviews with a broad selection of 'torchbearers', Carter and Baines explore the barriers, strategies and enablers that atypical women often share in order to make a difference. As a result, we better understand what draws such people into, and away from, standardized academic roles.

The developing narrative utilizes sub-themes and challenges the reader to question the "tick box" nature of how academia currently operates within institutional silos and traditional metrics, placing at its centre the requirement for developing supportive and inclusive environments and cultures. The authors expose further research requirements regarding the potential for atypical careers to enrich higher education through diversity and partnership.

Their evidence repeatedly demonstrates how skills related to communication, adaptability, real-world experience, practical application, collaboration, inclusivity, and business acumen are often under-valued. What is clear is that ‘impact’ – especially knowledge transfer and exchange – requires greater exploration and explanation if academia is to attract, retain and nurture talent to deliver on ambition.

—*Professor Lisa Harrison, Senior Leader and consultant in Higher Education*

Jackie Carter and Linda Baines have delivered a profoundly insightful and timely work with their book *Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women’s Atypical Stories*.

This book is an essential read for anyone invested in the future of higher education and, more broadly, the professional landscape. By meticulously weaving together the authentic narratives of thirty women, it not only illuminates the diverse, often non-linear, career paths that lead to and through academia but also bravely confronts the systemic barriers that persist. The book’s strength lies in its ability to transform individual experiences into universal lessons. It gives a compelling argument for why atypical trajectories are not just valid but crucial for enriching our institutions, fostering true diversity, and driving innovation. The call for torchbearers and positive disruptors resonates deeply, providing both inspiration for those navigating unconventional routes and a clear directive for leaders committed to genuine inclusivity.

This book offers a vital contribution to the dialogue on gender equality and professional development. It will undoubtedly empower countless women to embrace their unique journeys and challenge existing norms. A truly necessary and compelling addition to the literature.

—*Professor Olive Mugenda*

With their book “Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women’s Atypical Stories” Jackie Carter and Linda Baines have made their readers a gift as atypical and memorable as the stories of the lives and fights of these thirty remarkable women we are privileged to be told, and as the manner, balancing subtlety and boldness, in which they are written. These stories are individual, peculiar ‘data points’; yet they share features and, taken together, they paint a striking picture of our society and era. The book masterfully revisits a genre and strikes a chord; by putting names on and delving with precision and respect into personal struggles, it creates an inalienable bond

between the authors, their subjects, and their readers; one that we can carry to find our way in turbulent times.

—*Emmanuel Letouzé*, PhD, Director and co-Founder,  
Data-Pop Alliance; Adjunct Faculty,  
Columbia University and Sciences Po Paris

This book celebrates the valuable unique contributions from us atypicals that are sorely needed in Higher Education. These stories of tenacity, resilience and innovation highlight that academia is for us and we are needed. These stories demonstrate how feeling like you don't fit can be difficult but that mis-shapes can disrupt taken for granted knowledge – which is the point of academia is it not? Throughout the book issues of class and belonging permeate. These narratives indicate that working class women are more likely to find their way into academia through happenstance and fortunate career accidents rather than by design. This book on atypical careers helps lifting the lid on class to provoke discussion about the beauty and value of atypical career journeys whilst also leaving room to consider those who would like/or benefit from easier paths into academia rather than arduous climbs.

—*Dr Kelly Pickard-Smith*, University of Exeter

Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women's Atypical Stories, should be on the desk of every vice chancellor on the planet! I found the book to be extremely accessible, compelling, and honest. The story telling of the 30 women interviewed for the book, reveals such an insightful and intimate tapestry of perspectives and views, who have followed an atypical academic journey. I also loved the sub themes that emerged in chapters 5 and 6, revealing the barriers to change and lack of diversity, particularly in the higher education sector. There are also, lots of useful resources and further reading links included at the end of each chapter. I highly recommend this book, not just for women, but for everyone in academia and industry.

—*Professor Rhys C Jones*, Manchester Metropolitan University

A truly insightful and long overdue book. As a sector that needs to authentically diversify, this should serve as a guide not only for those academics from non-traditional backgrounds, but for senior university leaders who need to truly understand the challenges and unique perspectives and skills that these colleagues can bring. Furthermore, the book acts as a framework for

how leaders can create a framework for atypical careers in which all colleagues can truly flourish.

—*Prof Damien Page, Buckinghamshire New University*

An immensely valuable book for university leaders committed to removing systemic barriers and opening up career pathways to the strengths, creativity and determination of women that take atypical routes. For those navigating these routes, this book will provide inspiration and practical advice.

This important book responds to the urgent need for systemic change to break down career barriers for women in higher education, providing hope, real experiences and practical advice.

—*Professor Julie Hall, Vice Chancellor London Metropolitan University*

As a Professor of Education and a dyslexic, dyspraxic Eleven Plus failure, I was very encouraged by this book which lays out so clearly the many reasons why diversity equals strength in academia and wider society. The participant narratives highlighted myriad often gendered barriers, multiple creative ways to overcome them and compelling reasons why doing so benefits everyone.

—*Professor Nicola Martin, London South Bank University*

At its core, this book champions boldness, resilience, and a fiercely entrepreneurial spirit in shaping one's own professional journey. Designed for those who have crossed boundaries between careers and sector: including, but not limited to, academia, it offers both inspiration and practical guidance. The authors deftly unravel the complexities, victories, and distinctive experiences of atypical academic paths, shining a light on stories that challenge conventional definitions of success. Each narrative, whether from co-authors Jackie and Linda, or their contributors, inspires readers to embrace academia's unconventional avenues and to recognise the many faces of achievement. Thoughtfully structured with compelling personal accounts and actionable chapter summaries, this book serves as an indispensable guide for anyone forging their unique way or seeking renewed motivation to 'get in, get on, get out, and get along.' By elevating the voices of trailblazers and positive disruptors, the authors urge us to reconsider traditional academic trajectories and pursue what aligns best with our aspirations. Throughout, there is a powerful acknowledgment of the broader social impact these women make as

they seek to become ‘a source and centre of power,’ to resist external and self-imposed limits and become catalysts for change in higher education. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone eager to deepen their understanding of academic careers and to honour the courage it takes to carve one’s own path.

—*Sheree Palmer*, Education Consultant

**PRACTITIONER, PROFESSOR,  
RESEARCHER, REFORMER**

Women's Atypical Stories

BY

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And

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# FOREWORD

When I was invited to write this Foreword, I wasn't sure what I would discover. As someone whose own academic journey has been unconventional – more activist than academic – I've long been struck by how academic institutions operate: who they reward, why and at what cost.

The familiar trajectory – undergraduate to postgraduate, postdoc to lecturer and then on to a permanent role – is underpinned by expectations to juggle teaching, research and administration, all while prioritising publication above all else. This is how success in academia is typically defined and measured. Yet for many women, especially those from marginalised or underrepresented backgrounds, the route is rarely so straightforward. What may appear as deviation is often a reflection of life getting in the way but also of adaptation, of thoughtful reassessments, of resilience and innovation.

In *Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women's Atypical Stories*, Jackie Carter and Linda Baines explore these alternative journeys. They have created a space for 30 women to reflect candidly on entering, navigating, resisting – or departing – academic life through non-traditional routes. But this book does more than present narratives. It offers a compelling thematic framework – *Getting In, Getting On, Getting Out, and Getting Along* – that maps the multiple points at which systemic barriers emerge and the diverse strategies women develop in response.

These women are not just exceptions to the rule; they are survivors of institutional inertia, and in many cases, agents of change. They are reformers, disruptors and torchbearers. Their paths come with significant personal and professional challenges: the constant need to prove themselves, the frustration of navigating tick-box systems designed for more conventional careers and the burden of being assessed by narrow publishing metrics that often ignore real-world impact.

As the book rightly argues, academia remains a system built for uniformity. It continues to struggle with those who do not conform. Yet, as these women show, it is precisely those with atypical backgrounds who can bring the fresh thinking, practical insight and inclusive perspectives academia so urgently needs. Their work is often more outward-looking, collaborative and

grounded in the real needs of students, communities and partners beyond university walls.

Many of these women come with experience from other sectors and are especially attuned to what students require to thrive outside of academia. Their passion for subject and teaching, rooted in both lived and professional expertise, brings new relevance and energy to higher education.

This book is important not only because it documents women's atypical careers but because it makes a persuasive case for their value. These paths matter – for fairness, for relevance and for excellence. They matter if academia is to meet the demands of the 21st century. And they matter most of all for those too often excluded: disabled women, working-class women, ethnically minoritised women.

If the academy is serious about inclusion, it must start by recognising, welcoming and supporting the full diversity of routes into its ranks – and the varied strengths those routes confer.

Carter and Baines's work offers solidarity to those on less-travelled paths and calls on institutions to act with greater urgency: to widen entry points, reimagine progression and better reflect the societies they serve. In doing so, they point to a future where atypical stories are not just included – but embraced.

**Dr Helen Pankhurst CBE**  
Activist and academic

This insightful and important book explores women's non-traditional career paths in and around academia. Through careful analysis of 30 women's experiences, Jackie Carter and Linda Baines provide both a portrait of the challenges faced by those pursuing unconventional routes and a valuable roadmap for institutions seeking to become more inclusive.

The book documents the varied trajectories of women in academia, organised into four meaningful categories: those transitioning into academia from other professions (Getting In), those creating innovative hybrid roles within institutions (Getting On), those applying their academic expertise beyond university settings (Getting Out) and those whose careers defy easy classification (Getting Along).

Each story is presented with sensitivity to the institutional barriers these women encountered, from rigid promotion criteria to disciplinary silos, while also highlighting their creative strategies for success.

Particularly powerful is the book's exploration of how these women serve as torchbearers – illuminating alternative pathways for others – and positive disruptors challenging entrenched academic norms. Through their lived

experiences, we see how they persist in creating new roles and narratives despite systems that often marginalise non-traditional contributions.

The final chapters build effectively on these personal narratives to address systemic issues. Chapter 5 provides concrete examples of how these women facilitate knowledge exchange between academia and other sectors. Their boundary-spanning work, whether translating research for public audiences, fostering industry collaborations or developing community partnerships, creates value that often goes unrecognised in traditional academic reward systems.

Chapter 6 makes a persuasive case for why these atypical careers matter institutionally and socially. By connecting these career paths to broader goals like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the authors demonstrate how universities stand to benefit from embracing diverse forms of expertise. The discussion of how atypical careers can address issues of equity, relevance and impact is especially timely as institutions grapple with questions about their mission.

The authors themselves exemplify the torchbearers and disruptors they describe. Jackie's journey from a practitioner to a professor and Linda's work as an independent scholar model the very career adaptability the book champions. Their dual perspective as researchers and practitioners lends authenticity to both their critique of current systems and their vision for more inclusive alternatives.

A significant contribution that combines research with practical insights, this book advances our understanding of women's non-traditional career paths in academia while suggesting ways institutions might evolve to better support diverse forms of professional achievement.

Associate Professor Jonathan Boymal,  
RMIT University, Australia

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# OUR STORIES: HOW THIS BOOK BEGAN

Let's start at the beginning, with our own stories and how this book came to be.

This book has been written by two women who consider their careers involving working in and with academia to have been atypical. Both have felt isolated and marginalised at different stages of their careers, and yet both have accomplished recognition in their chosen fields. Jackie is an academic in a high-ranking UK university who has made her way from being a practitioner to a professor. Linda is an independent scholar who publishes with academics and has helped develop the field of being an independent scholar.

Jackie and Linda met online. They have, to this day, not met in person. Jackie conceived of the idea for this book and reached out to Linda who was seeking respondents for her own book. It became apparent that they had similar, and different, experiences, and that they had complementary skills and interests. They put their heads together, obtained ethics approval led by Jackie from her university, and Linda was granted visiting scholar status at the university for the duration of the project.

This backstory is important. The aim of this book is to draw on women's experiences to illustrate what is possible with perseverance and a stubborn streak. Had Linda and Jackie not met online (in the Women in Academia Support Network (WIASN), Facebook group), they may never have decided to collaborate. Had Jackie not felt an urgent need to shine a light on other women's atypical career journeys in, and in collaboration with, academia, she may never have plucked up the courage to reach out to the publisher to say that these women's stories need to be told and heard.

But we persisted. And here is the result.

As this is a book of stories, analysed thematically, we decided it was only right to begin with our own, enabling us to reflect on our positionality in this space, and our own non-linear journeys. At the end of the book, we reflect briefly on to what extent the themes we elicit from the women we interview parallel or depart from our own experiences and suggest further areas for research.

First though, we unveil how we both became atypical academics. Jackie wrote her own story, told in the first person, while Linda's was written after Jackie recorded a conversation with her.

### Jackie's Story

My own story provides the catalyst for this book. Having taken the long way round in my career (from practitioner to professor), I decided a book was required to illustrate the multiple ways women can and do navigate into and through careers in or with academia, via atypical routes. Speaking to other women about my ideas for this book then persuaded me it had to be written.

I became an academic in my mid-50s. As a child, I never expected to go to university having no knowledge of what a university was until my mid-teens. I grew up in a working-class family in the north of England, the fourth of six children. As a young child, I used to escape into books as a way of dealing with the cacophony of being in a large family and often feeling that I didn't fit in. I did well at school from a young age, in mathematics, science and the humanities, and this was fed back through parents' evenings and school reports. The family nickname for me was 'Posh'. I suppose my identity in the family was that I was the clever one, the swot. It's strange to be writing a book about career trajectories when as a child I didn't even really know what a career was. Dad worked in a factory cutting out men's suits, moonlighting in the evenings and weekends to make extra money. Mum stayed at home looking after the children, and sewing for dad late into the night, and then when we were a little older, she got a job as a dinner lady in the local primary school we attended. It wasn't until I took my O-levels – the external examinations as they were called in the 1970s – at the age of 16 that it became apparent that I could stay in education.

My three older siblings had left school at 16 (before the raising of the school leaving age), entering occupations in offices, shops and factories. I was encouraged by a teacher to stay on into the sixth form to do A levels. Although my highest O-level grades were in humanities subjects (English and Latin), I selected to study maths, chemistry and physics at A-level. I was (and still am) an analytical and a logical thinker. I liked problem-solving. I liked puzzles. I especially liked the order and precision that came with being good at mathematics although it's true to say that I didn't really enjoy the subject. It felt too abstract. Although I didn't get particularly good A-level results I was offered a place to study Social Psychology and Mathematics, at the University of Sussex and became the first person in my family to attend university – what we now call 'a first-genner'.

I was out of my depth the instant I arrived; a working-class, northern girl in a southern university among students predominantly from the south of England. It quickly became apparent that I was surrounded by people who had experienced significantly more privilege in both their educational backgrounds and their family upbringing. I was a fish out of water, but I found some people who became good friends; my best friend was also a northerner, and I married my closest male friend (a Welshman) a few years later. University was a bumpy ride though. I dropped out for a year (ended up living in a nunnery and working in a pub) after I failed to grasp how to write academic essays. The following year, I returned to do a different degree (Mathematics with its Applications). Although I received a grant, I still had to work throughout my degree in pubs and bars to make ends meet. I had no confidence and really didn't understand how it all worked or how to get good grades. I spent the entire time thinking I would fail. Somehow, I managed to gain a respectable degree graduating in 1983.

I moved from the southeast of England to South Wales. Three days before a post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) course was due to commence at the University of Swansea, I applied for and secured a place and spent a year gaining the teaching qualification through a combination of coursework and teaching practice in secondary schools. Over the next three-and-a-half years, I taught mathematics and physical education at a very large high school in the suburbs of Cardiff.

By the age of 27, I had married (the Welshman) and had two children just 17 months apart. After the birth of the second, partly due to the high costs of childcare and the low incomes we were on in public sector jobs, I chose to stay at home and look after the babies. In my early thirties, I became a single parent. That was a very tough time and although I could have gone back to teaching, I decided to use the change in circumstances to try to change my future. I signed up to study a national vocational qualification (NVQ) in computing. Putting the children in nursery, I spent the next year studying on the NVQ and learning Welsh. Performing well on the NVQ inspired me to continue studying, partly to escape from the very acrimonious marital breakup I had experienced, but also to create a different path to the one I could have continued along. I obtained a place on a Master's in Computing one-year course at the University of Cardiff. I threw myself into studying and discovered that I had an aptitude and flair which enabled me to combine my analytical skills and mathematical knowledge with the skills I was learning to apply computer science techniques to social problems. I don't know how I balanced studying full-time and being a single mum to two small children while living on a very tight budget, but I did. Without having access to low-cost nursery

provision, I probably would not have been able to do the Master's degree. Without having taken that degree, I am convinced I would not be where I am today. These two factors aligned to turn a bleak time into my life into one that opened up a future I could never have imagined.

I graduated from the Master's coming second in the year from a cohort of about 60. This achievement suddenly gave me the confidence to realise that I could create a new future for myself and my sons. One of the lecturers on the Master's course encouraged me to apply for a PhD. Me – being considered to do a PhD – this was the stuff of dreams! As it happens an industry-funded PhD had been advertised at the University of Leeds, my hometown where my parents and a sister still lived. My application was accepted. At the age of 32, as a lone parent, I moved from Wales to the north of England, to the city I had left 14 years previously. The three-and-a-half years doing the PhD enabled me to undertake caring responsibilities for my children, lean on support from my parents and two of my sisters and complete a level of study which I had neither aspired to nor thought I could achieve. Towards the end of the PhD, I secured a temporary non-academic (the term used for professional services staff back then) position at The University of Manchester and moved with my two children and new partner, an academic, who was to become my second husband to begin what has become a thirty-year career working in and with academia.

I took up the role at The University Manchester in December 1996. I then spent the next 17 years employed by the university but working across the academic sector, externally funded by an organisation that works nationally in higher education. I progressed from being a support officer to being a Director for Communications and Impact for an academic service providing socio-economic data for teaching and research, and a Director for Learning and Teaching services (on leaving these roles I was replaced with two people). I secured millions of pounds in grants to keep myself and my teams in post. I married and had a third child with the academic I had met during studying for my PhD and continued to take up career opportunities as they arose. I also received some excellent advice through a female coach who told me to write and publish.

Then, in 2012, I was asked by a senior academic (then a Head of School, now a Dean of Faculty) at the university to be a co-investigator on a grant with an academic colleague. We won £1.3 million to set up centre of excellence to teach quantitative research skills to social science students. My role was to pioneer and direct an experiential learning programme, placing our undergraduate students into prestigious organisations that I had built connections with, to help them put their data skills taught in the classroom into practice in the workplace. In 2014, feeling stuck in my role and unclear about my future

career trajectory, I took the PGCert in Higher Education course. A senior professional services colleague had referred to me as a 'pseudo academic'. At first, this upset me, but it spurred me on to write an essay for one of the course assignments in which I argued that the role I had created, working at the nexus of academia and industry, required a non-traditional academic – an atypical academic – to undertake it. A senior academic (a mentor who I know to this day) helped me present a case to the university which resulted in the Dean of the Faculty agreeing to move me to an academic contract. I was appointed a senior lecturer on a teaching and scholarship route, and my role as an academic, a very atypical academic, started there.

Less than three years later I was promoted to professor. This required eight references including four from overseas, confirming that my external profile and reach was strong. I had given many presentations internationally, written several papers on experiential learning in the context of teaching statistical literacy, and my work was being cited. At that point, I was also being treated for breast cancer and not living at home as our house had been flooded. Receiving the news that I had been promoted to a chair was uplifting in what was otherwise a dark time.

2020 was another year of two halves. I was awarded a prestigious One in Twenty award from the (now international) Women in Data industry body and a highly prized National Teaching Fellowship from Advance HE. Both came at a time when I was also dealing with the news that one of my children has an incurable cancer, and I was taken to hospital suffering from a rare condition called Ramsay Hunt Syndrome (brought on by stress) which has left me with deafness and ongoing issues with poor balance and cognitive processing difficulties. My previous cancer diagnosis meant I was categorised as disabled, but this condition has left me with disabilities that I have had to seek accommodations for. For instance, I can no longer teach as it requires too many skills and activities to be carried out simultaneously. Simply crossing the road now is a huge challenge.

My work at the nexus of academia and industry continued to receive recognition. In 2023, I was awarded the Everywoman in Technology Academic Award which is given to a woman in academia who has made an outstanding contribution to technology and science. And in 2024, I was awarded Principal Fellowship of Advance HE, one of the highest accolades bestowed in recognition for learning and teaching leadership accomplishments.

In a decade, I had transitioned from being a non-academic in professional services to becoming an academic, been awarded the title of professor, won two industry awards and two external professional awards for my teaching and scholarship. I received internal awards too and was asked to sit on

multiple internal and external committees to advise on experiential learning, took up roles as an external examiner at Hong Kong University and the University of Birmingham, UK, and acted as an advisor to other universities setting up programmes involving experiential learning. I was elected as a member of the International Statistical Institute and as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, both prestigious professional bodies. I published a book ‘Work Placements, Internships and Applied Social Research’ in 2021, several academic papers in high quality international journals and secured the contract for this book. Not bad for a once-described ‘pseudo academic’.

Despite not conforming to traditional academic categories, my contributions to academia have been acknowledged, evidenced by my university awarding me a professorship, as well as receiving multiple external accolades and roles. This bridge-building work is valuable and significant. My ambition, born of my own struggles to navigate academia, is to demonstrate to others that there are alternative pathways to engaging with different sectors, allowing us to bring valuable skills, knowledge and expertise to academia and vice-versa.

After experiencing substantial health challenges and becoming disabled, and having a child with a life limiting condition, I committed to utilising my personal experiences of overcoming adversity to support others. In addition to my substantive role as a professor of statistical literacy, I am now also The University of Manchester’s academic lead for disability inclusion. I was recognised in 2023 by The Shaw Trust as one of the top 100 disability leaders in the United Kingdom, top 10 in the academic category, and by an industry organisation as a Culture Change leader for disability in 2025.

This unassuming, working-class girl from the north of England has become an academic with a profile to be proud of. I want my story, and Linda’s, and the stories of the women we interviewed, to show other women how academia can be navigated atypically. And how it can be done while staying loyal to the values that drive you.

‘Practitioner, Professor, Researcher, Reformer: Women’s Atypical Stories’ aims to provide inspiration for women to explore future opportunities and foster hope. By examining the experiences of 30 women who have forged their own paths, we demonstrate that there are numerous ways to navigate non-traditional career trajectories, including those within or in collaboration with academia.

### Linda’s Story

Linda’s story also reflects an atypical pathway into becoming a researcher and captures how academic researchers can work independently of higher education institutions, as well as with academics in universities.

Linda was brought up in South Manchester, in the northwest of England, with parents from working-class backgrounds. Despite passing the entry exam for grammar school, her mother had not been allowed to attend it, and when she had children, she gave up working to look after them. Linda, on the other hand, the eldest of three children, attended an all-girls' grammar school and was placed in the top stream. In the sixth form, at the time Linda attended, female students had two main options: to go on to university or to teacher training college. She had not considered university until she realised that she was achieving top grades in history. Although her mother wanted her to attend the College of Technology in Salford (now University of Salford) to pursue business studies and become a secretary, Linda wanted to go away to university. By pursuing this, she too became the first person in her family to go into higher education.

Linda worked out that it would be easier to gain a place at university if she applied for a joint honours degree rather than just apply to study history. She attended Swansea University (University of Wales) (which had been her second choice) where she studied for a degree in history and politics. Linda married while she was at university. She recalls attending a careers fair in her final year and deciding that she did not want to work for a big business organisation. On graduating, Linda moved to London with her then husband to join the Civil Service. She eventually completed her probation satisfactorily, and in due course, she was promoted. After working in different roles in the Civil Service for several years, she decided that she wanted to specialise and to acquire a professional qualification. Finding out about government systems and processes at the then Civil Service College led her to pursue a profession in internal auditing; she obtained a professional qualification through a government-sponsored training programme over two years. And was promoted again.

By this stage, she and her second husband had a daughter. Linda became the family's main earner, and her husband became a stay-at-home parent, a choice that worked well for the family. They did not want to raise their daughter in London, in part due to the high costs of housing and competition for school places. She took a sideways move to work for the research councils (now part of UK Research and Innovation, UKRI), and the family moved to Swindon in the southwest of England in 1990. On promotion, two years later, Linda moved to a central science and technology research organisation at Harwell (also part of UKRI), and the family moved to live near Oxford where they have been ever since.

Though initially starting there as chief accountant, Linda moved into procurement. At this time, the government was starting to encourage

universities and public sector organisations to work with business (a function called ‘knowledge exchange’ or ‘knowledge transfer’). She identified a gap in her procurement role and realised that the organisation needed to develop a function which negotiated and developed guidance with customers, including negotiating collaboration agreements for EU research projects and a variety of other deals. She led initiatives in risk management and insurance working alongside external lawyers.

Her role expanded and she was promoted again. At this point, there were two main aspects to Linda’s role. Firstly, she led negotiations on major corporate contracts for big projects and corporate joint ventures such as Diamond, a big science facility at Harwell, and for science and innovation centres at Daresbury (near Warrington in the northwest of England) and later at Harwell. Secondly, she became involved in negotiating contracts for the organisation’s knowledge exchange and technology transfer functions. She also became involved in and joined the board of Association for University Research and Industry Links (AURIL), a knowledge exchange professional network (now part of Knowledge Exchange UK).

Linda worked on corporate contracts and negotiated deals, working closely with lawyers. She thrived on the variety, working on new projects and the opportunity to learn from the scientists. However, Linda was starting to realise that she wanted to put some theory around her practical experience, although she knew that she did not want to study law or become a lawyer.

In 2007, the Research Council Linda was employed by was merged with a smaller one, which effectively took them over. In the same year through attending a conference in Turku, in Finland, she met an academic who was running a Master’s in Commercial Management at the Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK. She was able to persuade her employers to sponsor her for a place on the course in 2008. She completed the main part of the Master’s in two years and finished her dissertation a year later. Her dissertation topic examined knowledge exchange and ethics, particularly how scientists are incentivised to start spin-out companies. She had really enjoyed the research for her Master’s dissertation and her supervisor, who was moving to the Business School at the University of Southampton, encouraged her to pursue a PhD and offered to supervise her. She put in a research proposal, it was accepted, and she started her PhD in October 2011 having completed her Master’s in the July (quite a few years after graduating with her Bachelor’s degree in 1973).

In parallel with undertaking her Master’s, and after some internal restructuring when Linda was moved to a new role, she started to realise that her *‘face didn’t fit’* her organisation anymore and she was feeling very

unsettled; she decided she needed to move on. Before starting the PhD, her employer put out a call for voluntary redundancies and on a whim, Linda applied with a view to seeing what her options were. To her surprise, her application was accepted and after some deliberations with her family, she decided to accept it, especially when her employer offered her a part-time consultancy role. The result was that she began the PhD part-time in October 2011, took redundancy in February 2012 and then worked part-time as a consultant for 18 months. She felt doing the PhD helped her make the transition from working full-time. While doing her PhD, she was also involved as a trustee in the third sector and in the local community. Her PhD was not smooth sailing; she recalls a lack of support for part-time and distance PhD students, something that she found was characteristic of many UK universities. Her PhD supervisor left in February 2015 as she was writing up. Fortunately, a good colleague stepped in to become her main supervisor, and they went on to co-author articles together. Linda submitted her PhD in January 2016, had her viva in February 2016 and obtained a straight pass. She described obtaining her PhD as one of the highlights of her life.

Her post-PhD career saw her publishing and becoming an independent scholar. She was given a visiting researcher position (an honorary role) at Southampton Business School. Linda felt like a novice researcher for some years after completing the PhD. She was offered a teaching role in academia but decided to turn it down as it did not offer the autonomy and flexibility she now preferred. Subsequently, she took on a variety of academic roles. She became involved in the European Academy of Management (EURAM) and became a peer reviewer. She supervised Master's students' dissertations on a casual basis and mentored EURAM doctoral students. She joined the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS, [ncis.org](http://ncis.org)) and was elected to their board in 2020. A year later, she became the vice president of NCIS and in 2022 was elected their president. Working with NCIS, she has co-edited an independent scholars' guide, and she has continued to collaborate with her former PhD supervisor at the University of Southampton.

Previously Linda had received a British Academy grant to research social responsibility in universities. Her current research is focused on the lived experiences of older women who started their doctoral research at 25 or later. Aiming to publish this research in a book, she is currently talking to prospective publishers. She is also involved in the Independent Research Ethics Committee ([irec.org.uk](http://irec.org.uk)), and is a member of the editorial board of the new *Journal of Creative Research Methods*, to be launched by Bristol University Press in 2025.

In summing up Linda's story, she identifies as an entrepreneur with a small 'e' and describes her research approach as a pragmatist. She values independence, creativity, and autonomy in her own research, for which she uses qualitative methods. Authenticity and being true to herself drive her choices, and she feels her position as an independent researcher gives her both. Her commitment to this book on women's atypical stories reflects what she describes as a common thread of entrepreneurship, crafting and creating opportunities and seeking opportunities that align with her values and walking away from those things that do not. Her own atypical story complements those in the pages to follow.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have many people to thank starting with the 30 women who we interviewed for the study. Without them, there would be no book. Jackie spent over 30 hours listening to these women's stories, and we collectively spent many more hours re-listening and then reading and re-reading the transcripts. We trust that our interpretation of their data demonstrates to all participants that their contributions were valuable and their time was well spent. We also hope that readers will see their own stories reflected in these 30 women's words and our interpretations of the interviews. We acknowledge any errors on our part and accept full responsibility for them.

We would also like to acknowledge The University of Manchester for support with the ethics clearance for the interviews to take place, and for offering Linda the opportunity to be a visiting researcher for the period during which we wrote the book.

Jackie would like to extend all her love and thanks to her magnificent family. Andrew, Beth, Huw, Rhydian, Lauren, Laura and the three grandbabies Isla, Immy and Jacob. As a family, we went through a very tough spell in the last months of this book project – with the return of a brain tumour for one of us and the resulting fallout of this – but once again we pulled together and showed just what love and perseverance can get us through. A shoutout too for an anonymous counsellor (whose work is included in a further reading section of this book), and my coach, Agi, who is helping me plan for the next big adventure. And of course, my incredible women networks who sustain me including Claire-Marie, Carol Ann, Helen, Claire, Nadia, Francine, Dee, Rachel C, Dawn, Kathy, Laura, Rachel H, Vanessa, Debbie, Pip and Tine. And Hamied. Senior colleagues who supported and believed in my vision, especially Chris, Fiona and Tarani, deserve a special mention. And everyone on LinkedIn or through my professional networks who has reached out and offered support for this book saying, 'it has to be written'.

And Linda would like to thank RB and JCB (they know who they are) for all their love and support during the gestation of this book, her close buddies AJH, MKO and GMO, who have sustained her all the way, and to JC for being 'such a brilliant collaborator and co-author'.

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# INTRODUCTION

This book provides a first step in exploring atypical career trajectories of women working in or with academia. The authors' own career paths have provided the motivation. The book is structured as a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews undertaken with 30 women who have navigated non-traditional pathways in academic and related sectors. It aims to shed light on the challenges, strategies and contributions of these women, and to provide inspiration to others. It also reveals insight into how academia can evolve to embrace diverse career paths.

We were encouraged by the publisher to write a book that would appeal to different audiences, and that would align well with the 'Emerald Points' series. We deliberately set out to ensure that the book would be accessible to diverse audiences, and with that in mind we have not written a 'typical' academic book. Each chapter concludes with a further reading section (save for the one in which we introduce our interviewees). Led by the narratives from the women we interviewed, we set out to honour their stories and unveil the predominant themes, and sub-themes, in each chapter. We hope we have written an atypical book that reflects our aims. We have not provided a theoretical framing for the book and acknowledge that this may be regarded by some as a weakness. We aimed to foreground the women's voices and stories – to let the data do the talking. The book is full of quotes and extracts, and we hope we have done our interviewees justice by taking this approach.

Who do we hope will benefit from reading this book? We want women who are considering entering a career in academia to pick up this book, but we caution that if you plan to navigate a more traditional career path then there are probably other publications that are more relevant to you. Similarly, we want women who are in academia, on academic or professional services contracts, to read this book and consider the multiplicity of ways that they can work in academia and/or with other sectors. We want academics to consider this book as an alternative way to publish findings from a study that as far as we can tell has not been conducted before, and to use the material we present to critically reflect on the many theories that might be used to explain

our findings. And we want those who are tackling the systemic barriers to women progressing through their careers, to take succour from this book, especially in considering the alternative ways in which women can navigate their careers including working in or with academia.

Most of all we hope this book will challenge the reader – whoever you are – to think more creatively, and to challenge the ‘tick box’ nature of how academia currently works.

The 30 women who offered to share their stories provide the backbone of this book. We thank each of them. We gave them the option to be fully identified, or to be pseudoanonymised. We tried our best, given the time constraints for the delivery of the final manuscript, to share a draft with them so they could check our crafting of their wording. We extend our apologies for any mistakes we have made and take full responsibility for these. Each semi-structured interview was conducted and recorded online by Jackie, the lead author. Each lasted for up to an hour, using the same questions. In each interview, Jackie looked for a nugget that set that interview apart, differentiated that story, making notes after each interview to share with Linda. Linda took responsibility for dividing the transcripts into the initial themes we had identified separately and then together, and we then shared the writing of the chapters, iteratively refining and discussing the themes and sub-themes for each. The style of writing therefore reflects that there were two authors, working in parallel though with different styles. We loosely adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2022) approach to undertaking reflexive thematic analysis, though we did not use qualitative software to code our interview data.

Towards the final stages of writing ‘life happened’ and Jackie as lead author assumed responsibility for completing the book. Those who follow us on social and professional media platforms know some of this, others do not. Suffice to say that life echoes art, and our own lives as authors echoed some of the stories and themes we unveiled while analysing the interview transcripts and writing the book. In Jackie’s case, she sought first a counsellor then a coach to help. Linda drew on the strength of loved ones and supporters to get her through. Our learnings from this are that we needed each other, and our support networks, just as the women we interviewed told us they do too.

We were granted ethics approval from The University of Manchester and each participant was sent a Participant Information Sheet and asked to sign a consent form. They were free to withdraw at any stage during the study. None did. Having been asked initially whether they wished to share their name or be pseudoanonymised, we checked in as we were writing the book to see whether they had changed their minds (two did). In the final analysis, of

the 30 women we interviewed, just six asked to be pseudoanonymised (these are referred to throughout as Beth, Eleanor, Sally, Ada, Louise and Amy). As we had two Lisas, one has agreed to use her middle name (Jayne), and where we have two interviewees with the same sounding given name, we differentiate them using the first initial of their surname (Katie D and Katy G). We have a Julie and a Giulia so should you decide to listen to this book be aware that these are two people (as audio pronunciations of these two names are very similar).

Setting the tone and describing the origin of the study, the book begins with the personal stories of the two authors, Jackie and Linda, who themselves have atypical academic careers. Jackie's journey from a working-class background to becoming a professor in her mid-50s highlights perseverance through non-linear career stages including professional practice, teaching and scholarship and academic leadership. Linda's story reflects on her transition from public service and professional roles into independent scholarship, reflecting the values of autonomy and creativity in research outside traditional academic institutions that she holds dear.

In **Chapter 1, Navigating Academia Atypically**, we categorise the participants' career journeys into three main groups: getting in, getting on and getting out of academia, with a fourth emerging category, getting along, introduced later. Systemic barriers such as the emphasis on publishing (*'publish or perish'*) and the perceived privileging of traditional academic roles that often marginalise atypical career paths are revealed through the interviews. The chapter highlights the need for 'torchbearers' – women who illuminate alternative pathways – and 'positive disruptors' who challenge and seek to change the status quo within academia. Women report their experiences of discomfort and isolation in traversing their careers in and with academia atypically. Their reflections show how nonetheless they persist in creating new roles and narratives for atypical academics.

In **Chapter 2, Thirty Atypical Careers**, we introduce the 30 women who were interviewed in our study. Building on the three categories introduced in Chapter 1, we allocate the women into four categories based on their career trajectories.

- **Getting In:** Women who transitioned into academia from other sectors, often bringing professional qualifications and experience (e.g., teaching, accountancy, medicine). Twelve women fall into this group.

- **Getting On:** Women who have navigated unconventional paths within academia, often achieving senior roles and extending their expertise and influence into public domains. Six women are included here.
- **Getting Out:** Women who left academia for other sectors but have maintained connections or collaborated with academic institutions. Six women are in this group.
- **Getting Along:** A group of six women whose careers do not fit neatly into the other categories, including independent scholars and those working in academic-related sectors without sustained academic appointments.

The chapter also discusses the varied motivations for participating in the study, ranging from challenging negative narratives about leaving academia to inspiring others through sharing alternative and atypical career stories.

**Chapter 3, Subject Knowledge, Skills and Experience from Atypical Careers,** explores the knowledge, skills and professional experiences that our interviewees bring to academia and beyond. We find that subject knowledge through a first or higher degree often acts as a motivator for career choices, but participants share this *'domain expertise'* is only part of their story. They reveal a broad range of transferable and professional skills, and stress the value of skills such as communication, adaptability and business acumen which are crucial for teaching, research and knowledge transfer. The challenges of current reward and recognition systems in academia are highlighted, particularly for those entering academic careers from professional backgrounds.

In **Chapter 4, Movers and Shakers Embracing Atypical Careers,** we examine how the women interviewed proactively shape their careers, demonstrate entrepreneurial initiative, reflect with intention and act with purpose. They reveal how they communicate assertively, speak up and challenge the status quo, and often create or negotiate new roles, proving their value to their institutions despite sometimes not having traditional academic credentials (such as a PhD). This chapter discusses the precarity that many face, especially early career researchers, and the personal costs associated with navigating atypical paths. It stresses the importance of support systems and networks, including mentors, advocates and coaches. The interviewees have found support to be vital for their career progression, and many are now giving back by mentoring and supporting others who are following in their footsteps. Developing supportive and inclusive environments and cultures was a strong sub-theme.

**Chapter 5, Building Bridges Through Atypical Careers,** focuses on how women with atypical careers contribute to knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE), acting as bridges between academia and other sectors.

Their responses reveal they engage in translating, interpreting, and communicating research for diverse audiences, drawing on the skills and experiences that were covered in Chapter 3. They place emphasis on collaboration, consulting and co-producing knowledge and their professional experiences can set them apart from more conventional academics in this regard. Their roles often involve making academic knowledge accessible beyond the university, contributing to societal impact. The chapter highlights frustrations with academia's limited recognition of KTE and the challenges posed by institutional silos and traditional metrics. Participants advocate for more holistic and inclusive approaches to knowledge sharing that value diverse contributions and experiences, beyond those often highlighted in definitions of KTE that focus on research.

In **Chapter 6, Why Atypical Careers Matter**, the discussion focuses on the significant contributions of women with non-traditional career trajectories to higher education and related sectors. These individuals advance the objectives of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promote greater equity and inclusion through their diverse roles. The chapter focuses on the potential for atypical careers to enrich higher education through diversity and partnership. We show how the women in the study align their roles with various SDGs, especially quality education (SDG 4) and partnerships (SDG 17), contributing through education, research, and external collaborations. Women with atypical careers build valuable relationships inside and outside academia, supporting SDG 17 and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, which they feel that academia often undervalues. We uncover how socio-economic barriers persist in higher education. Many participants have working-class heritage and share how classism and elitism in academia hinders inclusivity and representation. Despite cultural diversity, women report experiences of exclusion or unbelonging based on gender, disability and race. Structural issues like childcare affordability and traditional family norms create inequalities that inclusion efforts have yet to fully address. We argue that achieving equality requires academia to move beyond policies and focus on people, and to value the creativity, determination and contribution of those with atypical careers. Finally, to diversify the academic workforce, targeted efforts to recruit staff from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds are called for.

## Further Reading

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

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# NAVIGATING ACADEMIA ATYPICALLY

This chapter sets out to explore the theme of how the women we interviewed described their own journeys in navigating their careers. We are not attempting to capture or reflect the individual stories they tell, and certainly not to capture the complexity and detail that many related to us, including very varying timelines, but rather to focus on the themes that arose for these women as their careers intersected with periods spent working in or with academia. Chapter 2 covers each woman's trajectory in more detail and uses the three categories – getting in, getting on and getting out – that we developed in this chapter, as well as developing a fourth category, getting along.

We are deliberately not prescriptive in our use of terminology and instead encouraged the participants to interpret the questions they were posed in a way that made sense to them. Likewise, we do not intend to provide you with a formal definition of what we mean by atypical, but we will illustrate how our interviewees responded to various questions they were asked, and we have already described our own atypical career paths.

At the end of each chapter, we list further reading materials for those interested in exploring the existing and emerging literature relevant to the themes elicited from the interviews. The further reading section at the conclusion of this chapter offers additional context regarding the purpose of universities and outlines the various career paths available within or related to higher education. Although there are publications on women in academia, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive texts focusing on women whose careers are not exclusively academic or research-oriented, or on those who work across multiple sectors, including academia, except for works discussing individuals with professional and practical experience.

The questions we asked that elicited the main theme and sub-themes in this chapter were:

- Do you think academia embraces those who follow atypical trajectories?
- Given your experiences of working in or with academia, past or present, would you describe it as an inclusive sector to work in?
- What are your general thoughts about academia? Is it for people like you?

Other questions touched on women's atypical trajectories, and we draw on responses to those where the findings align with this chapter's main theme.

From the 30 women interviewed, none had followed a conventional, linear career path. None had moved from school to college to a Master's and/or PhD and then entered an academic career in what might be considered a traditional manner. This trajectory does not describe the experiences of the women included in the book.

The types of roles and stages of careers reflected in our sample of women are captured here. We spoke to women who had started out in a conventional academic career path, including having obtained a PhD, and subsequently left to move into industry; early career women who decided to not pursue a PhD but rather chose to undertake research roles in the not-for-profit sector; women who were undertaking academic roles, including publishing, while employed on professional services contracts; those working in the Third Space (see [McIntosh and Nutt \(2022\)](#) in further reading); women who reached professorship in their university who then chose to leave the sector in search of achieving more societal impact; an independent women scholar; women with a professional background in practice (e.g. actuarial science, teaching, accountancy) who joined academia, either in academic or professional services roles, mid-career; and women working on precarious contracts at various stages in their careers. Most women had a Master's or higher degree, while some were continuing to study for higher degrees as part of their professional development. Crucially, every woman included in this book has had experience of working in or with academia at some stage in their career, either as an academic or in professional services. We did not focus on the type of contract (e.g. teaching and research, teaching and scholarship or equivalent, professional services) our respondents were employed on when in academia – although some did share this information, and their responses may reveal this.

## GETTING IN, GETTING ON OR GETTING OUT

To start, we look at the categories of women who shared their stories to give the reader a sense of which respondents took which trajectory. There were three main groups. Those who talked about getting into a role in the academy, those who talked about once in, getting on and those who decided not to stay, or at least not stay in a full capacity. This section sets out to look at some of these experiences in the categories of getting in, getting on and getting out. Once we have described some of the different and common experiences, we focus here on one of the prevailing sub-themes that arose, pertaining to the need to publish to be successful in academia. A fourth group revealed itself to us as we analysed the interview transcripts, and we introduce this in the next chapter.

Many of the responses pertaining to the larger theme of navigating academia atypically revolved around recruitment, promotion and progression. Sentiments ranged from being generally discontented and often frustrated to being downright angry with how higher education was historically set up by and for men. Some felt it continues to perpetuate recruitment in the likeness of those who sit on appointment panels, although there was also recognition that things are changing and that diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives may be making a difference, though often at the margins.

As we have said, none of these women has taken a straight-line career path into their roles. We will go on to look at how persistent many of these women have had to be in the next section, but what was very noticeable from the interviews, and what we unpack in this chapter, was how our respondents perceived their paths as being different from what they considered to be a more traditional route into roles in academia.

We listened to many of our respondents discuss the systemic barriers women face in getting on in academia. The ways in which women found themselves working in or with academia provide us with a rich set of stories and insight into considerations for bringing more diversity of career pathways into the higher education sector. We heard from some women who decided that even after previously considering a career in research, they decided not to pursue this route, instead getting out of academia by moving to other organisations that undertake research. It is not our intention here to be discouraging, but rather to learn from individuals who have transitioned out of higher education – and understand their reasons for doing so – to offer insight for those contemplating a career via non-traditional pathways. We also heard, encouragingly, of the benefits to those who work in the academy who are

lighting the way for others, and we shine a light here on those who are excellent role models, or torchbearers as we go on to call them.

Many commented on how they perceived higher education to be set up for those on a much more conventional career pathway than the ones they were sharing. Jennie talked about the need to look beyond job titles, observing that the academy risks haemorrhaging ideas and losing talent if it continues to prioritise defining people by a description of their role/s. Jennie has been employed on academic and professional services contracts, and her reflections provide a compelling example of how knowledge, skills and experience can be transferable and how she continues to challenge how people are valued. She also spoke about the danger of holding people back from innovating by slavishly focusing on job titles or contract types, saying:

*The barriers are sort of systemic assumptions of worth and the way we identify this. So, if you have a PhD you know how to research ... if you're on an academic contract you can do stuff with the word academic in it. So it's like the assumption that we make around people's expertise based on certification or job title, which now that I've said it – that's daft. I think every year we lose out on brilliant minds because they look at what they'd have to compromise and think 'absolutely not, that's not for me'. And every year we miss someone's important contribution because we weren't listening in the right way.*

Jennie, a multi-award-winning professional, works across her university in spaces that develop student talent. Her interview portrayed her as an innovative, inspirational and passionate leader with vast pedagogical experience in teaching students. Her frustration with pigeonholing people according to the title on their job description was palpable. She is a fine example of a positive disruptor, too – which we discuss later in this chapter and elsewhere in the book.

The women who had studied a higher degree, up to a PhD, or were bringing professional knowledge, skills and experience into higher education were particularly vocal about the requirement to have a research publication record to enter, and get on in, an academic career. There was frequent reference to how limiting women find the 'publish or perish' model of reward and recognition and the privileging of research over teaching, which was especially noted by those on academic contracts. Over a quarter of our participants spoke about this, without any prompting.

## GETTING IN

For those wishing to come into roles in academia through non-traditional routes, there was less emphasis – perhaps through lack of knowledge about the need to publish, – placed on this. Nonetheless, our interviewees did touch on their perceptions of the importance of publishing. For those from first-generation backgrounds, like Dawn, who passed her PhD with only three minor corrections, this requirement can be problematic and worrying.

*You know, and yeah, I've always done well at school and uni, but it was never, you know, nobody understood the system. So I've not had anybody to talk to about anything through my life in terms of, you know, somebody that could inspire or be my role model and even people that have tried to help me over the years in terms of saying, Oh yeah, you need to do this and you need to publish this and you need to do that. But they've never quite understood that I need them to take me back to absolute basics.*

And even for those who have worked in other sectors, like Julie, who has spent a decade working for NGOs and is now studying a PhD, the way academia works can appear to be unequal from the outside looking in:

*A few months ago, I was listening to a podcast on Brazilian female professors. There was something related to how female professors were systemically like harmed because of certain rules of production, etcetera .... . like the numbers of articles produced I can't remember exactly the technicalities of it, but it was that system of like how do you grow in in your academic career, . . . and towards becoming a professor and that has impacts on the number of articles and your salary levels and your promotions etcetera that whole system there and they were saying well yes. But like that never takes into account for example that we at some point have breaks in our career because of maternal leave, etcetera. So we're systemically harmed and then we cannot compete to the same level because of how the structure is made. And I think that's true, there's too big [an issue of] of balancing in terms of gender for a professorship.*

## GETTING ON

Some spoke animatedly about the barriers in gaining recognition in their work to enable them to move into senior roles, given the focus in academia on publishing. Louise, located in a School of Education, said:

*Our focus has always been on the student, in the classroom, and that's where I think the discipline is different because it's about the scholarship of our work, how it's applied in a way that is effective for students and learners, not just publish or perish, which I think is a horrible phrase but is bandied about in other disciplines.*

And Jennie, who we have already seen, is challenging the practice of universities putting people into boxes they don't necessarily fit into, said:

*The problem in the academy is that that [it] ends up being a barrier for both directions, so that you've got people who actually would like to be T&S [Teaching and Scholarship] staff that aren't supported and vice versa and not supported to have higher level leadership roles because they've not done the publish or perish. So it yeah, it's very problematic.*

Hannah, who has progressed to a senior researcher role in academia and who also now works in a science communication role and publishes her research for public audiences, talked about the barriers she encountered in progressing higher in her academic role:

*Having a non-traditional academic role creates a very obvious ceiling for you within the university, so I realised within the university ladder I've already reached the ceiling and I can't go any higher doing what I'm doing now and that's because to get promoted to a higher role there are basic requirements or tick boxes like the number of academic papers you're producing... there are very obvious tick boxes, and if you don't have those like you can't get promoted to a professor or similar type position.*

## GETTING OUT

Joana, Ariadna and Jennifer are all women with PhDs who, for various reasons, left academia to pursue other careers. They reflect on how the need to publish papers – or as Ariadna puts it, to be a ‘*paper machine*’ – left them

frustrated and, in some cases, dissatisfied. All these women have gone into satisfying and successful careers outside of higher education while still being connected with academic research.

The following three quotes are attributed to Joana, Ariadna and Jennifer in order.

*Academia was no longer so interesting because we do have to play the publish or perish game.... you're supposed to be publishing, but .... I also felt that it was becoming a bit empty, so it was more producing papers for the sake of producing papers.*

*I like academia in terms of how we get knowledge exchange and all these dynamics but at the same time I'm not so sure if now we are just in the train of producing just papers, and you're a machine of papers.*

*I'm just having to do all the same things that I was doing before. Just without having to produce papers on it and without having that snobbery of whether it's good enough or not.*

This section has illustrated the ways in which some of our respondents have moved into, or progressed through or moved out of careers in higher education. We have focused on their perceptions of one of the core expectations of having an academic career – to publish research – as this arose in many of the interviews, even though we did not ask a question specifically on this. Elsewhere in this book, we will focus on other aspects of academic careers, including teaching and scholarship and on those who have professional services roles.

## NAVIGATING ACADEMIA ATYPICALLY NEEDS TORCHBEARERS

We move on now to eliciting some of the themes that women shared with us about how they navigated their careers. At the time of writing this section of the book I (Jackie) have just returned from a day conference involving 3,500 participants. The name of the event is Women in Data, which is an endeavour to get more women and girls involved in data and tech careers. I was awarded a One in Twenty Women in Data accolade back in 2020, and to be part of this group is a privilege, as it provides a window onto the world of work that students can graduate into. There is something incredibly powerful about

being in an audience of almost exclusively women, talking about how they deal with adversity, find role models, support others, challenge stereotypes and build an inclusive workplace that they and other women can excel in. As always at these events, I speak to lots of people and am often the one who puts her hand up to contribute. There are many, many women I meet, though, who are not confident or comfortable enough yet to do that. Or may prefer not to. We need to confront this – so that the reader can be encouraged by other women who have navigated their careers atypically.

This section provides a synthesis of why the women we spoke to shared the need for more torchbearers to shine a light on the possible pathways for those pursuing an atypical career route working in or with academia. It also reflects one of the main purposes of this book – so that others can learn from the experiences of these women what a torchbearer does or can look like. We use the term torchbearer here rather than role model, as the image of shining a light from the front is a powerful one. Imagine for a minute what a torchbearer means for you and how this might differ from a role model. It is intended to signify that there is a path ahead and that there's someone sharing their light with you so that you can step onto that path.

Some of the women interviewed, especially those who have strong external profiles in their roles, were exercised by being outliers and recognising that they do not fit neatly into academic boxes. In fact, the term 'box ticking' was one of the most used terms by our interviewees. They also felt strongly that for academia to change and to embrace new types of leadership that span different sectors and roles, it needs to recognise the uniqueness of atypical or non-conventional careers. Many of those interviewed talked about being a role model, or needing a role model and nearly all spoke about being in spaces that were not well understood or clearly defined. They also shared that they were the people who had to do the hard work of elucidating to others what their roles entail and often justifying to more traditional role holders (academic and professional services) what their role involves, and sometimes even why they were qualified to be in those roles. These women were talking about 'being comfortable with being uncomfortable', as it's clear to us that many are having to be the torchbearer, not only lighting the way for others to follow but also clearing a path to enable themselves to define new roles in academia. In other words, many of these women are having to first clear the way for atypical roles as well as then illuminating it for future atypicals. In this way, they carry a double burden as pioneers navigating a system where the career path is unmarked, and their interviews reflect how they are doing this.

Rita, who describes herself as a yet-to-be scholar, said: