EXITED

Terminated from Higher Education

Edited by Camille Kandiko Howson,
Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

VOLUME 16

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH VOLUME 16

EXITED: TERMINATED FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

This book is designed to shed light on an aspect of higher education that is relatively little researched, yet of growing importance and impact: that is, the increasing tendency for the careers of those who work in universities to be ended abruptly with the individual concerned 'exited' from their post.

Market dynamics and the impacts of regulation and government policy are playing their part in this as more universities experience funding crises leading to restructuring, resizing and mergers. But there is more to understanding the reasons why people are being exited from higher education than purely sector economics. Corporatism, together with commercialisation, shapes cultures, attitudes, values and careers as well as the very nature of what is means to be employed in higher education today. That employment is now more uncertain at every level of university employment is a key take-away of this book.

We outline here the core themes resonant in this text and return to them in the volume's conclusion.

A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

This text explores the causes and experiences of involuntary exiting of university employment. In this we have used the term 'exited' as a terminological catch-all. Clearly, there are many ways in which people leave their employment as the accounts in this volume testify. Hyslop et al. (2021) provide a standard research definition of involuntary exiting or what can sometimes be referred to as forced

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job loss. Here involuntary exiting refers to those instances of dismissal for external economic or market reasons: layoffs, redundancies and shut-downs. It does not include the end of contracts, just-cause dismissals due to employee malfeasance or resignation through career progression.

However, sitting under the statistics that are captured through large-scale lay-offs are a host of other reasons for forced job loss. Two examples are explored in this text. One is how toxic work environments create conditions that become insufferable or make people ill. For many experiencing this, there is little choice in the end but to leave. For those who are the targets of bullies, similarly, they are usually forced to resign for the sake of their own sanity and health leaving the bullies in place to find new targets.

At managerial and executive levels, the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) also masks the nature of resignation. There are legitimate reasons for using NDAs: for example, to prevent the sharing of commercially sensitive information that may jeopardise competitive advantage in respect of research or teaching. Much of the focus on NDAs recently has been in respect of sexual harassment, bullying and whistle blowing. In such cases, universities have agreed to cease using them to prevent further investigation. However, the use of NDAs in respect of managerial and executive level exit leaves a gap in our knowledge in how voluntarily, or involuntarily, people leave their employment. Here, the silencing clause of NDAs is exceptionally damaging for research, monitoring and knowledge of this area.

Amidst dozens of pages of dense legal jargon, NDAs include clauses such as not directly or indirectly mentioning the terms of settlement, meaning that signing one means silencing. This 'black hole' has also shaped this book, as being 'exited' becomes something no one can talk about. Thus, contributions in the volume largely focus on the conditions that lead to exiting, practices that support exiting, cultures that let exiting thrive and experiences of those exited. Exceptions include a few brave cases where individuals waived their right to settlement or went through lengthy and costly employment tribunals.

HUMAN COSTS

A forced transition can be an especially painful way to change career. Forced career transitions bring with them distinctive challenges. In addition to the difficulty of leaving an established career, knowing the change is involuntary can heighten the sense of loss (Kinicki et al., 2000). This loss may involve income and status, important elements to many. But still more may be at stake. Work is often central to people's identities, defining who they are and what they believe in (Dutton et al., 2010). Moving out of a particular line of work can be identity-disrupting, altering how people understand themselves (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). In addition, a career is often embedded in a network of relationships that extends back over many years. Being forced to leave a career can therefore damage someone's identity and undermine key relationships. This in turn has significant

implications for how that person makes sense of their life to move forward (Maitliss, 2022, p. 104).

There is a view that once you have lost your job, you should just get on and move to the next gig (Carey, 2023). Yet the unsought ending of a job can lead to multiple cascading losses (van Eersel et al., 2021). One cannot 'carry on' between academic roles. Research progress halts without access to libraries, journal subscriptions and research facilities. Research students and teaching is left in limbo. Academic networking slows without institutional affiliation, and as Chapter 6 highlights, an institutional email address. With NDAs in place, no one gets to hear what happens, with the void filled with rumours, gossip and hearsay. Alongside the hurt, and a sense of powerlessness that occurs, those who find themselves exited can experience anger, shame, a feeling of humiliation together with anxiety and stress about the future. Those exited can also find themselves poorer and with careers at a crossroads or at an end.

A review of the international evidence on involuntary job loss presents a stark picture of 'deep and persistent negative consequences' (Hyslop et al., 2021, p. ii). Hyslop et al. note a sharp drop in earnings in the immediate term with a continuing wage penalty. These financial outcomes are worse for women and when we take account of the intersectional impacts of race, class, age, religion and disability. When we combine this loss of income with poorer mental health outcomes that Hyslop et al. remark are also common, we get a real feel for what it means to be exited. Acute stress and feelings of hopelessness or uselessness are not uncommon. The data Hyslop et al. draw on also indicate poorer health and mortality outcomes.

Watermeyer et al. (2024, p. 3) comment that 'leaving academia may be much more than just leaving a *job* – its emotional investment and affective depth merge personal and professional identities to the extent that separation can be deeply traumatic'. That involuntary job loss can cause post-traumatic symptoms and depression is well researched in the psychological literature (van Eersel et al., 2019). Yet, as Watermeyer et al. (2024, p. 3) reflect, such is the depth of loss that 'a process of bereavement and recovery from lost and/or dismembered identity... demands a reimagining and reconstruction of the self'.

van Eersel et al.'s (2019, p. 429) research into job loss as grief draws attention to how job loss should be considered as a major life event 'rather than unemployment as a state'. They suggest that it can be considered akin to the loss of a person. This is an apt analogy in that one can experience a loss of identity at the ending of a career. Grief reactions include 'separation distress, yearning for what is lost, a sense of bitterness and/or numbness, and difficulties to accept the loss and its implications' (p. 429). For some, grief becomes more persistent and the sense of loss lingers. Psychologists refer to this as complicated grief characterised by 'separation distress combined with difficulty accepting the loss, moving on, and finding meaning in life, causing persistent suffering and impairments in functioning' (van Eersel et al., 2020, p. 698).

The emotional and psychological landscape of being exited is written into every chapter in this volume.

NORMALISATION OF TOXIC CULTURES

As we have noted, one form of forced job loss is the experience of working in toxic and bullying cultures – something several of our contributors reflect upon. Indeed, perhaps we should not be surprised that an environment of resource constraint, competitive market conditions, changing government policies, downsizing and resizing, contractual changes for staff, programme rationalisation and the commercialisation of research is not only producing high levels of anxiety, stress and burnout. Such environments also support bullying cultures and toxicity.

Yet bullying in higher education is not a new phenomenon with Heffernan and Bosetti (2020) noting over 40 years of research on this topic. It does, though, appear to be culturally resilient with many staff reporting a significant gap between the rhetoric of anti-bullying policies and the reality of their experiences (Barratt-Pugh & Krestelica, 2018). It is here that we see how objectionable behaviours become culturally normalised. Two examples illustrate this phenomenon.

One is provided by Nelson and Lambert's (2001) ethnographic study of university professors accused of bullying. Nelson and Lambert describe how those accused deflect such claims by indicating that they are a victim themselves; that it is they who are uniquely capable of knowing the true meaning of events; and by seeking positive emotional responses to their own situation. As Nelson and Lambert remark 'attempts to label bullying behavior frequently fail because the judgments are seen as mere matters of opinion in an environment whose principal currency of exchange is opinion itself' (2001, p 109).

A second example of normalisation is how cultures of incivility – low key negative behaviours such as rudeness, withholding information, interrupting others, spreading false rumours, sending unpleasant emails, eye rolling, losing one's temper – flourish in universities. In fact, one might say that they are common. Bosetti (2021) asks us for example 'How many times have we stood by in discomfort as collegial exchanges escalate to vitriolic personal attacks and unproductive assaults?'

Heffernan and Bosetti (2020) highlight that while bullying and incivility share some behaviours, incivility is less a pattern of behaviours directed at targeted individuals than bullying. Because of this, incivility can easily be dismissed as part of normal day-to-day communication. Nonetheless, research indicates how particular groups are more likely to be at the receiving end of uncivil behaviour. One example is that of women and racialised faculty who are more likely to experience mistreatment at work (Dengate et al. (2019). The normalisation of rude and offensive exchanges is such that as Bosetti (2021) remarks 'Rather than calling out this uncivilized conduct, we tolerate or even sanction it by our silence. Through our inaction we permit a toxic culture to fester'.

Suffice to say, as Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica (2018) note, the structures and institutional values of universities provide a protective shield for intimidation. This discourages detection and the effective labelling of bullying behaviours as bullying. This is a key theme in this book as our contributors reflect on the costs and consequences of working in such environments.

JOB LOSS AS CAREER SHOCK

There can be no doubt that job loss creates a significant career shock at the individual level, causing a reappraisal of the meaning of work, career direction and opportunity. Akkermans et al. (2018) provide a useful framing for understanding the impact on the changing nature of careers in higher education – a further core theme of this work.

Akkermans et al.'s concern is that our understanding of career has overly focused on the agency of individuals to shape their own career paths, particularly in respect of discourses such as 'there is no job for life'. Concepts such as the protean and boundaryless career came to the fore in the 1990s, emphasising personal goal–directed behaviours. In marginalising structure and environment from research, career researchers have paid no recent attention to the impact that career shocks can have on career trajectories. Accordingly, there is virtually no contemporary research that explores how career shocks – such as involuntary job loss – impact career development.

Career shocks are:

> Major events that transpire in people's lives [and] have a nontrivial impact on the career paths of many people. These events are oftentimes unexpected, meaning either that they cannot be anticipated and proactively acted upon or, even when anticipated, the effects of the event are not anticipated. (Akkermans et al., 2018, p. 2)

Career shocks are relatively infrequent and extraordinary events, yet when they happen, they cause people to give deeper thought to their career that can ultimately impact a career path. Our contributors certainly demonstrate this.

While Akkermans et al. focus on the individual level of the variables that will impact on people's responses to a career shock – such as whether the shock was expected or unexpected or its duration – our text also focuses on how there have been substantial changes in the forms of work and types of career that are available in universities as a consequence of the external funding and regulatory environment (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020). As we reflect in the conclusion, we are now in new territory to fully understand this combination of career shock and the changing nature of career for those who work in universities.

CONTENTS

The book contains 14 chapters organised into seven parts. This organisation is partly a matter of convenience; however, as the foci of many of the chapters are of relevance to more than one part, so other ways of organising the contents would have been feasible.

Part 1 comprises the current chapter.

Part 2 contains three chapters focusing on bullying in academic life and the broader context of the mental health of staff. In Chapter 2, Malcolm Tight provides this broader context in offering a systematic literature review of current research on the mental health of staff in higher education. He notes that this has

been much less studied than the mental health of students, but stresses its importance for the overall vitality of the sector.

In Chapter 3, Wyn Evans reviews the evidence on bullying and harassment in academic life, with a particular focus on the United Kingdom, noting just how prevalent these experiences are. In Chapter 4, through an interview with Fran Sepler, Christina Hughes explores the relationship between incivility and bullying.

Part 3 offers two case studies of the impacts of bullying and suspension.

Part 4 contains two chapters examining the nature of exit cultures in higher education. In Chapter 7, Steven Jones considers how exit cultures have become rife in the era of marketisation and neoliberalism. In Chapter 8, Celia Whitchurch reviews the implications of exit culture for academic careers.

Part 5 includes three chapters focusing on particular periods and levels in academic careers. In Chapter 9, Camille Kandiko Howson examines mid-career academic culture, and the incidence of competition, dead ends and burnout. In Chapter 10, Megan Lee assesses the hidden costs of leadership through the impact of occupational stress in middle and senior academic roles. In Chapter 11, Camille Kandiko Howson and Kelly Coate summarise their research on senior professional leaders, toxic teams and institutional cultures.

Part 6 offers two responses to the prevalence of exit cultures in contemporary higher education. In Chapter 12, Justine Mercer considers the role of educative leadership and trade union resistance. In Chapter 13, Christina Hughes reviews the meaning of silence and feminist narratives of leaving the academy.

Finally, Part 7 consists of a concluding chapter by Camille Kandiko Howson, Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight.

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