

# Forging identities: the experiences of probationary lecturers in the UK

Jan Smith  
Centre for Academic Practice & Learning Enhancement  
University of Strathclyde  
Graham Hills Building  
50 George Street  
Glasgow G1 1QE

0141 548 3127

[jan.smith@strath.ac.uk](mailto:jan.smith@strath.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

*This article concerns itself with how academic identities may come to be formed. Taking a longitudinal approach, stories of the experiences of probationary lecturers have been gathered and analysed, to outline an emergent typology of academic socialisation. Whilst the stories are unique to individuals, and the broader context of their experience is key, some overarching trajectories through the probationary period emerged from the data. For some, the transition to academic life is unremarkable, and identity is untroubled. For others, this appears to be a more troublesome time and a good deal of dissonance is encountered: an academic identity is hard-fought and felt to be forged in difficult circumstances. The 'underlying game' (Perkins, 2006) of UK higher education may thus be experienced as more confounding and inhospitable than we would hope. Attention to this 'game', and explaining the 'rules' may well be beneficial to new colleagues, smoothing a sometimes difficult journey.*

## Introduction

This study of beginning UK academics explores how changes in status can mark a significant transition: many new colleagues will move towns, countries or even continents, and find themselves in a role where tacit knowledge dominates everyday practices. This article investigates experiences of one practice that is long-standing and almost universal in UK higher education institutions: probation. The nature of probation has not been well investigated, and little is known about the experience of its day-to-day operation.

The probationary period can differ widely in a UK context. Three kinds of UK higher education institutions are represented in this study: 'old', research-intensive universities; 'middle-aged' universities whose roots may be old but gained university status in the UK higher education expansion of the 1960s; and the 'new' universities which were once polytechnics and gained university status in the early 1990s. In the first two of the categories, probation is commonly set at three years, with the potential to extend this to four years where there is cause for concern. In 'new' institutions a period of one year is more common. It should be noted, however, that custom and practice can be localised and institutions will vary from this generalised model. Virtually every individual appointed to an academic post will, however, be subject to some form of probationary requirement and, whilst it is a practice commonly applied, little is known with respect to new academics' understandings of the probationary process. As there is little reported in the existing literature with regard to responses to probation, the current study is not intended as a comparative work. There is no suggestion that practices are worse – or indeed better – than they have been in the past.

This work considers how new academics experience probation and become socialised to the ways of higher education. The study sought to elicit new academics'

perceptions of their experiences across a year of their probationary periods, and the focus here is on the overarching socialisation trajectories that emerged from interviews. The study is framed in terms of the nature of professional learning and identity formation, explored in the following sections, followed by an explanation of how the work was conducted. The findings detail an emergent model of three trajectories through the academic socialisation process.

## **Professional Learning**

Until recently little attention has been paid to probation as a topic for research, and much of what exists tends to focus on new academics' experiences of learning to teach (Sadler, 2008; Ramsden, 2003), although Trowler & Knight (2000) and Archer (2008a; b) take a wider perspective. The concern with the learning to teach agenda is important, as the notion of professionalising teaching is probably the newest probationary requirement. This is manifested by the proliferation of nationally-accredited teaching qualifications for lecturers such as Postgraduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching in higher education (PGCerts). PGCerts represent a significant investment of time for new academics who are simultaneously learning about the variety of responsibilities attached to their new roles. Whilst such courses are probably amongst the most evaluated in any institution (Prosser et al, 2006; Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006), there is less of an evidence base as to what constitutes them. Where course evaluation work can demonstrate what works well in these courses, and sometimes what does not, this strand of literature rarely looks at what happens outside of new colleagues' participation in them. Looking at the wider socialisation experience can, as Trowler & Knight (2000) demonstrate, help to contextualise PGCert evaluation work and its place in supporting the development of an academic identity.

Knight, Tait & Yorke (2006) demonstrate the benefits and value of informal learning for new academics. They conclude that '*learning on the job*' is a preferred mode for new academics coming to terms with their teaching role. The importance of the 'doing' of teaching to influence new academics' views is clearly discerned in the case studies reported in Sadler (2008). His notion of '*interactions with students*' (Sadler, 2008) plays a key role in new lecturers' understandings of their teaching. Similarly, Trowler & Knight's (2000) conclusion of 'departmental (or other activity system) leadership as central to successful induction' (p38) are clear determinants of lecturer behaviour. These local practices are an instructive contrast to studies that suggest formal, conceptual change programmes of initial professional development are strongly influential (Prosser et al, 2006).

As noted above, PGCerts are a recent development in response to recommendations made by the Dearing Inquiry (NCIHE, 1997). Concern has been raised that the previously traditional apprenticeship model inferred by 'learning on the job' (Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006) does not pay enough attention to 'doing' (Sadler, 2008; Cousin, 2008). As Cousin suggests, the enculturation of new academics can be dependent on the quality of a local learning community. Such enculturation can perhaps perpetuate older, or even poor, practices.

Acknowledging the tacit dimension of academic enculturation is not to denigrate the importance of formal initial professional development. This issue has a long and chequered history in the efforts to professionalise the teaching role of academics (McAleese, 1979). It appears that such efforts were actually the catalyst for current probationary arrangements in the 'new' sector of UK higher education through the Association of University Teachers/Universities Authorities Panel (AUT/UAP) Agreement reported in McAleese (1979). He reports on a university-trade union agreement in 1971 that constitutes current probationary practice (1979). He also highlights the difficulties of achieving consensus on initial professional development. With little agreement, it becomes difficult to conceptualise whether such development is about professionalising teaching in the sense of a licence to

practice, (as envisaged by Dearing, 1997) or whether the current requirement to participate might better be envisaged as a means to support the establishment of an academic identity. This issue can be seen most markedly in the UK in the adoption of different approaches to initial professional development. Some institutions provide in-service qualifications for new colleagues focusing specifically on the development of teaching and learning, whilst others take an academic practice approach considering wider issues (leadership, management and governance, or writing for publication, for instance). Some universities make no such requirements at all, and few, despite having mentoring procedures, adopt a team or departmental locus of control for initial professional development identified as desirable by Trowler & Knight, (2000).

If initial professional development is contested territory in contemporary higher education, recent literature perhaps points to a potential source of some of these troubles. The notion of a liminal space, as first developed by the social anthropologist Turner (1969), signifies a temporal, transitional space where an individual is transformed through collective ritual. Extrapolating this idea to higher education, Meyer and Land (2003; 2005) suggest a liminal space can accompany episodes of significant learning that lead to a transformed way of understanding. Liminality can be characterised by periods of oscillation between states or statuses – the becoming and being of new academics. In some instances, however, the challenges encountered in remaking an identity, of achieving the desired transformation, may be experienced particularly acutely. In this case, loss and uncertainty may predominate, leading to the adoption of a pre-liminal stance (Meyer and Land, 2008).

A pre-liminal stance is a space, temporal rather than geographical, where experimenting with fluidity in identity can offer more loss than gain, and change can be rejected. Whilst most research in relation to this idea has been centred on the formal undergraduate curriculum (Meyer and Land, 2006) where a challenging conceptual difficulty is the stimulus to liminality, there is potential for applying this thinking to informal and/or

professional learning contexts. '[T]acit presumptions' as Perkins (2006:40) argues, 'can operate like conceptual submarines that learners never manage to detect or track' and can unsettle probationary academics who may yet have to fully internalise the rules of the UK academic game.

The transitional nature of probation which can extend to a maximum of four years, is an opportunity to develop an academic identity. Where identity is not unduly troubled due to a continuation of previous identities and experiences – in other words, ontological security (Giddens, 1984) is maintained – challenges through the new demands of initial professional development through a PGCert is likely to be straightforward. Where existing views about identity may be disturbed through a discontinuity in norms and practice, and especially where a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) is missing, the liminal space becomes a useful lens through which to understand how academic identities are constructed. As Perkins (2006) asserts, the 'underlying game' of tacit knowledge may be prevalent in conceptions of higher education. Programmes of professional development can potentially surface tacit knowledge and practices, which can be unremarkable for some, whilst for others they may exacerbate discontinuities.

The idea of a liminal space, and the related phenomenon of the 'underlying game' (Perkins, 2006) play an invaluable role in drawing together both formal and informal learning and its role in identity formation for new academics. Perkins (2006) and Meyer and Land (2003; 2005) point us in the direction of contemplating the '*being*' aspects of an academic identity together with the '*knowing*' aspects. Against the backdrop of increasing fluidity (Clegg, 2008) versus increasingly managerialist demands (Davies and Petersen, 2005) (see below), the following section introduces ideas about how identity formation can be approached.

## Identity Formation

Identity, in this context, is not taken to mean a unitary entity. Lawler (2008) suggests developing our identities is a fluid process of co-construction in a variety of social situations and understood, in Western tradition, as encompassing both individualised and collective elements. The implication of this view for the current study is that my focus is only on the individual performance of (aspects of) an identity in a very specific social situation – the research interview – that stands as a proxy for actual probationary experiences. This is not to suggest that the ‘performance’ referred to in this context is in any way inauthentic. It is simply recognition that the specific setting of a (recorded) research interview is a co-constructed event, a report or reflection on experience. The paradox of identity as both individually and collectively constituted, and our means of *‘getting at’* what may be important remains a challenge.

What is implied here follows Giddens (1984): the new academics in this study are considered ‘purposive agent[s]’ (p3) with the caveat that their ‘knowledgeability’ (p282) may be called into question in relation by their new ‘routine’ (p282). Barnett’s (2000) supercomplexity thesis also troubles these notions of both individual and collective views of an academic profession by noting that professional and functional boundaries are increasingly becoming blurred, and that uncertainty must become our watchword. He is supported by Davies and Petersen (2005) who argue that we are currently experiencing a perceived erosion of academic freedom through a growing concern with a neoliberal agenda undermining agency and collegiality in academic life. This contemporary backdrop of concerns regarding the nature and quality of life within the academy may have an impact on the experiences of probationary lecturers. In the first instance, their experiences are unlikely to mirror the ‘golden age’ literature that Taylor (2008) comprehensively reviews.

In keeping with contemporary lived experience research, Archer (2008a; b) highlights perceptions of classism, racism and sexism that permeate 'young/er' academics' experiences of the academy. Her view, like Lawler's (2008) is that identity is 'discursively produced and 'becoming'' (Archer, 2008a: 269). It appears that Archer's respondents (2008a; b), whilst conscious of the creeping performativity in UK higher education, are also conscious that central characteristics of their identities – such as being working class, a person of colour, young or female – are not often represented in the role models available to them. Rather than acquiesce to a pervasive performative agenda, Archer concludes (after Clegg, 2008) that her respondents are equally committed to Clegg's notion of 'the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency' (Clegg, 2008: 343). The changing role of the academic, with its potential wider variety of career choices and aspirations, can thus be seen as a space where identity can be (re-)negotiated on a regular basis.

Conceptions of identity as elaborated by Lawler (2008) suggest fluctuating, individual *and* collective influences. The neoliberal discourse permeating the academy evinced by Davies and Petersen (2005) suggests that more individually-focused and competitive behaviours may bring rewards. Agency and autonomy, as Davies and Petersen explain, need to be actively encouraged to serve the neoliberal agenda, whilst simultaneously rewarding only specific forms of behaviour. Thus, agency in academic work is to be applauded provided it is directed at furthering the 'new performativity' (Davies and Petersen, 2005: 95). Can we marry the pervasive neoliberal discourse of Davies and Petersen (2005) with Clegg's (2008) rendering of academics as carving space for their personal projects? How are the early days of academic socialisation, subject as they are to the performative requirements of probation, actually experienced by new colleagues?

After epistemological commitments have been made through advanced study of a subject, those taking up an academic post may expect a greater sense of intellectual interaction by joining cognate departments. The locus of control for establishing an academic



identity in the UK context, however, can still be seen as residing with the autonomous individual by exercising agency (Giddens, 1984). The paradoxes involved in individual and collective identity formation (Lawler, 2008), and between agency and structure (Giddens, 1984) in UK higher education inform the analysis in the latter part of this article.

## **Method/ology**

The extended nature of probation in UK universities suggests a staged approach to data collection to capture the complexity of the socialisation process. Work of this nature is often limited owing to time and resource constraints. Sadler (2008) and Archer (2008a; b) provide nascent models of the benefits of a longitudinal approach, using multiple interviews over a period of time to capture change. In this study, three interviews were scheduled over the course of a year of the probationary period to capture change and development in participants as they experienced the rhythms of an academic year and the deepening socialisation that goes with the passage of time. Whilst the longitudinal aspect is relatively brief, it does represent an attempt to capture change over time, and has been able to illustrate developments during the probationary period. In total, 60 interviews were conducted with 23 participants from 11 universities, representing a spread of disciplines and institution types. Details are briefly summarised below:

-- Please put table 1 here --

These interviews were open-ended and loosely-structured, enabling a focus on what respondents considered key influences on their socialisation. The work is inductive and interpretivist in nature. As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest, we cannot get at experience directly, only reports of that experience, which Gomm (2004) would categorise as 'incommensurables' – the data collected are not matters of fact that can be verified in other ways.

The data in this kind of study are thoughts, values and beliefs, and the assumption here is that such accounts are valuable in that they provide a range of perspectives.

This is an opportunistic sample; there is no claim to representativeness given the uniqueness of every individual's experience. However, overarching trajectories did emerge from the data, which are reported in the following section of the article. First, however, the limitations of the study are addressed. A likely criticism is that there is bias in self-selecting samples. This is acknowledged as a very real danger. However, many of the participants in this study elected to become involved just a matter of weeks after taking up post: their motivation cannot have been a wider telling of a story as yet unknown. Alternatives to a traditional, qualitative interview study were not contemplated in this instance, due to the impracticalities of, for instance, an observational study with geographically distributed participants, drawn from throughout the UK.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Certain features of interview talk were immediately striking. It is these distinctive stances – the ways participants in this work positioned themselves (or felt positioned) in relation to their probationary processes – that emerged from an initial thematic analysis of the data. The finer details of the sample are withheld to protect confidentiality and thus, quotes are not attributed, though it is made clear where the words of interviewees are used. Informed consent was obtained prior to the research process. Any interviewee who requested transcripts had them made available at the end of the process. In this way, by avoiding sight of the transcript of any previous conversation, it was hoped to avoid any kind of 'contamination' of the data, for it is entirely the shift in perspective, or potential contradictions between interviews (in other words, learning and development over time) that was to be privileged by the longitudinal process.

## **Findings**

A striking feature of the interviews was the ease with which new colleagues' experiences could be distilled into a limited number of positions. A picture of three distinctive trajectories through the academic socialisation process emerged from the stories that participants told, notwithstanding the uniqueness of individual circumstances. These are elaborated in Figure 1, illustrated by key words from participants' vocabularies along with the emotive dimension of interviews that are not commonly available only in verbatim transcripts. These data and field notes serve as proxies for the experiences of individuals in the absence of intrusive detailed observation of daily practices. It is worth noting here that committing the model to paper potentially loses its dynamism whereas it is frequently characterised by movement. By categorising in this way, I do not mean to imply 'types' of new academics, simply that there appears to be a limited range of responses to probationary circumstances.

--- Place Figure 1 here ---

The trajectories are summarised in Figure 1 to structure the direction of argument in the sections that follow.

## **Resonance**

For colleagues in this category, who constitute less than half the sample (10/23), the transition to their academic roles appeared untroublesome, and their identities unchallenged. These are the stories of those with a 'traditional' academic baptism, often with a very strategic focus on their careers. Where this is not the case, a resonant socialisation experience is frequently enjoyed by 'accidental' academics. The accidental academics, by definition, have little conception or expectation of the role, having just, as they put it, 'fallen in' to the job. Thus, they cannot be upset or surprised, having had no pre-conceived ideas. The strongest influence here comes at the departmental level. Joining a 'friendly' department

persists as a touchstone as they co-construct their identities (Lawler, 2008) in a supportive space. This might suggest that the prevailing neoliberal discourse has indeed become the 'furniture of [the] mind' (Davies and Petersen, 2005: 85), with new colleagues finding nothing amiss as they are inducted into such practices.

Certainly, the role of the immediate community of practice (Wenger, 1998) appears to be to promote the healthy integration of its new members that Trowler and Knight (2000) assert. But even where this assimilation is positive and untroubled, it does not necessarily manifest itself in the display of the 'performative subject':

*but they get a bit upset about their workload model here... My suggestion was we just leave the spreadsheets well alone and do what we want to do anyway...*

*research is undoubtedly a big part of that, um, you know it's not necessarily about getting bigger and better grants or anything, but just keeping doing the kind of research that I'm interested in...*

If anything, this interviewee may be seen to be subverting the dominant discourse. There is use, and recognition, of neoliberal discourse, but identity is untroubled as the subversion is congruent with the supportive and collegial atmosphere of the department. The scope to exercise agency to manage and balance key demands on new academics – their teaching and research roles – is clearly recognised, and the aim appears to be to assert autonomy. Neoliberal discourse suggests a need to perform in certain ways (Davies and Petersen (2005) and in this response category does not dictate, but informs, the process of academic socialisation by creating space to do meaningful teaching and research.

The resonant trajectory is a smooth one that recognises current contexts, but allows the exercise of considerable agency. There are constraints on all social actions, but in this form of socialisation, constraints are not strong enough to reduce new academics to purely performative subjects: space for exercising autonomy exist notwithstanding the

encroachment of a neoliberal agenda. Equally, however, there are those who assert untroubled identities and have similarly congruent experiences in their departments, but can be seen to represent the neoliberal subject position put forward by Davies and Petersen (2005). This usually manifests itself in acknowledgement of the economic imperative – and the perception of a degree of instrumentalism in certain forms of scientific research – that perhaps suggests that there might be disciplinary differences in how resistance to the dominant discourse may be constructed. There appears to be continuity in conceptions of identity for those who report resonant trajectories, but not over-confidence.

Concerns about probation surface occasionally in these interviews, but there appears to be no over-riding concern that this will present great difficulties, although it is experienced very personally:

*I don't really think I'm too worried about the probation thing, um, that's what I say, I'll either be kicked out at the end of 3 years or I'll be told to pull my socks up.*

Where an individual's identity is not yet challenged by the teaching role, the focus is on establishing a research identity. This is often experienced as a continuation of previous activity, smoothed by good relations with Ph.D. supervisors or other colleagues. Where research is not in focus, administration and bureaucracy (accounting for time spent, revalidating courses) negatively colour perceptions. Notably, for those whose experiences are categorised as resonant, they continued in this vein until the end of the interview process displaying no shift in position to either of the more troubled trajectories.

## **Dissonance**

Ten out of 23 participants in this study constitute those reporting dissonant socialisation experiences. Their identities are not only challenged, but perceived to be under threat:

*it is like I'm a blank piece of paper that I cannot be trusted and there's something about it [having an annual work schedule] stamped approved on every page that I find particularly outrageous...*

*I think the worst thing is just the complete and utter lack of any kind of team work, everybody just in their own little hole, shovelling away and you know, you get pitifully little help as the new person, um, and you only find out how it's supposed to be done when you're found to be doing it wrong.*

These colleagues feel they join departments where the ethos is far from collegial. Neither managers nor mentors appear to be especially helpful, and the probationary process is either bureaucratic or unfathomable. In this area the departmental locus of learning and development advocated by Trowler and Knight (2000) breaks down: there is no localised community of practice to join to become sensitised to the role. Those in this category report a sharp sense of isolation:

*I felt there hasn't been that space in which I can raise professional issues so you end up not knowing what to do...*

*this guy turned round to me, I've been here 14 months, and asked me who I was and you just like, you're head of research in the department, I'd spoken to him numerous times on the phone and yet he didn't have a clue who I was.*

Anger permeates their talk as lived reality clashes with expectation:

*I think that my response [to the PGCert] as well is a sort of ideological response as well because I see it as a sort of a part of the neoliberal agenda in higher education, it's part of that turning students into consumers and turning us into deliverers... we were constructed as passive victims [of the IPD agenda]*

Participants in this study who had transferred between different kinds of institutions (from old to middle-aged, for instance, or internationally) were surprised by encountering

neoliberal discourse. As with those colleagues with resonant experiences, much of the variation is likely to be related to expectations. Where there is disjuncture between expectation and lived reality, this can contribute to the dissonance experienced and there appears to be no gap for any kind of meaningful personal project (Clegg 2008).

It should be a matter of grave concern to those who work in UK universities that interviewees reporting this kind of unhappy experience reside alongside colleagues in the previous category, in the same institutions, but that their socialisation experiences differ enormously. The greatest inequity results from the most basic formula: what exactly, in terms of teaching and research outputs, are required to satisfy the probation process? In one department in one institution, first-year academics are limited to 20 hours' lecturing per annum. In another department, the expectation for new lecturers is 240 hours' teaching across the year. Such comparisons are facilitated by the multidisciplinary PGCerts, whilst probationary criteria are opaque but assumed to be equivalent.

There are also concerns about damaged productivity attributable to the feelings of uncertainty, often accompanied by an investigation of alternative career options. Where norms and conventions previously internalised are neither present nor valued in the location of the first academic post, dissonance arises. There appear to be two major sources of dissonance. The first stems from the increasing diversification of institutional mission. Where this is very different to previous academic experiences or completely new for colleagues entering the academy from other economic sectors, the ideological clash is strongest. A second cause of discontinuity is the perceived lack of trust enacted by bureaucratic, managerialist procedures.

In contrast to the more stable identities expressed in resonant experiences of socialisation, those who encountered dissonance talked differently over time as they negotiated their liminal spaces (Meyer and Land, 2005) to forge an academic identity. The

earliest interviews featured the emotive vocabulary seen in Figure 1, but this was tempered by the end of the interview process. The ontological security (Giddens, 1984) that had been disrupted by changed circumstances was beginning to return as new routines were recognised and perhaps better understood by participants who had experienced uncomfortably dissonant socialisations.

## Rejection

A small minority in this study (3/23), all with lengthy backgrounds outside of the academy, held different views. Whilst it would be possible to include this small group within the dissonant socialisation trajectory, there was a quality inherent in the language in use which pointed to their transitions being experienced differently. Where most respondents could be seen to be negotiating a liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2005), this group could be regarded as pre-liminal. There was a sense in which an academic identity, far from being something to construct or aspire to, was something that other people did, and not necessarily very well:

*the interdepartmental politics and nitpicking just, well, to be honest sometimes they just make me smirk and laugh at them because really they've got bigger things to be doing than worrying about who said what and who's authorised to say what rather than you know, being process driven, it, in the private sector as a business consultant I'd describe it as silo management, they're each in their own little silo and really what goes on in another one they don't care about as long as it doesn't impact on their silo...*

In this small section of the sample, the rejection of an academic identity appeared to stem from a personal acceptance of the neoliberal agenda, and the perception that higher education in the UK currently falls so far from attaining the requisite performativity. The neoliberal discourse that Davies and Petersen (2005) suggest has permeated higher education is, in effect, being dismissed as little more than amateurish attempts to impose a neoliberal agenda by UK universities. But again in this positioning, we see movement over



time, and in directions that also distinguish it from the dissonant socialisation trajectories. Of the three interviewees who rejected engagement with Perkins' 'underlying game' of tacit rules and values (2006), one was lost to the study as he left his university between the first and second interview points. Undoubtedly, he would have plenty to say that may enlighten us how the rejection of an academic identity is understood, but this insight is not available. A second, by the end of the process, was actively contemplating a return to the commercial world of his recent past.

*the environment's fine, that's OK, I can deal with that, there's worse places to work, I don't like people being complacent right, I don't want to become a 50 year old senior academic waiting for his time and it's that kind of institutionalisation that I see in newly-qualifieds that I don't want to become...*

The third respondent from this group, after some time resisting higher education's performative demands, undertook the interview process in her third and final year of probation. By this point, there were signs of confronting 'the academic game' and negotiating terms. There is a growing recognition of the rules of the game, but a subversive selectivity in which of the rules will be obeyed, in keeping perhaps with the position of those experiencing resonant socialisations. Thus, in moving from rejection to dissonance, this respondent was clear she was accommodating rather than assimilating the unexpected managerialism. This participant was actively engaging with the neoliberal agenda in areas of less personal value, whilst retaining the space for Clegg's (2008) 'principled personal autonomy':

*the director sort of said these results are really bad across the board and we know this class is very poor attenders, their discipline is very poor and um, there was one student who was on 39 and got it pushed up to 40 and everybody else is being required to resit and there was no kind of debate about it or no kind of inquest,*

*there's just a little research project in the [name] lab and it's all good stuff it'll help me with things but it's not helping me get on with my thing [a Ph.D]... but I don't want to turn down things like that because I can't and I really don't want to but it's, I know we're going to arrive at August and September and people are going to say ok then, you've been registered for a PhD for 8 or 9 months now*

Given the increasing diversity of institutional mission, and what this may mean for recruitment, there may be a concern that traditional induction and probation procedures pose difficulties for this category of staff. The caveat that those rejecting the socialisation experiences are a small minority in this study is acknowledged. It seems, however, that the gap between expectation and experience is large, and unpleasant. For all the potential benefits that those with long histories outside of the academy could bring to the learning experiences of students, there appears a very real danger that they will not stay long enough for the benefits to be realised.

## **Discussion**

The attainment of an academic identity can be seen as troublesome for more than half of the sample in this study. For those whose identity is untroubled through resonant experiences, the combination of a supportive, collegial departmental ethos and appropriate expectations, mediates their induction to the academy. It may be a concern, however, to see so many reporting more problematic experiences. As Trowler and Knight (2000) report, local practices can and do help sensitise new colleagues to their new roles, but even where these practices and expectations are congruent, there is still a degree of uncertainty during probation. Despite otherwise successful efforts to induct probationary academics, it is clear that whatever is actually required to pass probation and become confirmed in post is not transparent. Neither are there established and appropriate benchmarks in place: despite strategic orientations to their career development, the tendency for those experiencing a resonant socialisation is to aspire to the performance of much more experienced colleagues, leaving a residual sense of uncertainty that they are doing 'enough' of the 'right things'. It is not suggested here that this is overwhelmingly problematic; simply providing realistic

benchmarks, appropriate mentoring and adequate feedback may remove the residual uncertainty attached to the probationary process.

In contrast, there is much to worry about for those colleagues undergoing dissonant socialisation experiences. Extrapolating from this small sample, it is possible that half of all new academic appointees may, at some level, confront unpleasant experiences. A significant source of disjuncture, according to participants in this study, comes from a difficult transition from a research-intensive (old) university experience to a different kind of institution where practices are unfamiliar. As a limited number of UK universities produce the greatest proportion of new Ph.Ds, this would suggest that any further concentration of Ph.D. level work in fewer institutions would be unfortunate, considering the wider range of institutions where new academics will begin their careers.

The implication for practice is that closer attention to induction may be appropriate for new colleagues who are moving between distinctively different institutions. The local practices assimilated during Ph.D. study do not appear to translate easily to the wider context, ensuring a great deal of dissonance ensues. Over time, there is evidence that those colleagues whose initial experience is dissonant do, over a year of their probationary period (but not necessarily the first year), carve out the palatable niches that Clegg (2008) and Archer (2008a; b) champion.

But there does appear to be an inflated cost at work here, in terms of personal stress, diminished productivity and anger at the unexpected compromises required. This is not to suggest that new academics should be made to conform to the ultimate neoliberal subject that Davies and Petersen (2005) suggest now dominates academic life. Rather the contrary. Supporting new colleagues to map out where their autonomy might lie, in terms of research and teaching, through enhanced mentoring and collegiality may be an appropriate way forward. For many in this study, the pervasive neoliberal agenda was experienced as

disempowering, just as it can be for more experienced staff. Exploring the powerlessness-inducing neoliberal discourse may be a useful way forward to support the establishment and maintenance of an academic identity.

Those in the third category, who initially reject the notion of constructing an academic identity, provide evidence that suggests it may be appropriate to revise induction and probation processes for colleagues with long histories outside of higher education. These colleagues provide an interesting contrast to how higher education researchers interpret the encroaching neoliberalisation agenda. Those whose talk is peppered by features of the rejection discourse, as shown in Figure 1, do not necessarily echo the neoliberal discourse concerns elaborated by Davies and Petersen (2005): it seems the notion of resistance inheres in the criticism of the academic mindset asserted by these colleagues.

The analysis presented here draws attention to the strength of new academics' views about positioning themselves, or being positioned, as they join the academy today. A striking feature of the data generated is the limited number of responses to the probationary period. As should be expected, there are differential experiences, given the diversity of disciplinary and institutional cultures. However, it is unfortunate that many experiences are less positive than would be hoped. Much of this troublesome uncertainty – the liminal experiences of colleagues negotiating Perkins' (2006) 'underlying game' – may well be attributable to the long-standing practice of academic probation that seems simultaneously an early example of neoliberal surveillance technology (Davies and Petersen, 2005) whilst still retaining the distinctive features of an amorphous 'golden era'.

Thus far, the analysis has focused on academic socialisation in its broadest sense, using the department as the functional unit for socialisation experiences. I turn now to the most recent specific requirement imposed upon many new academics: their PGCEs. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) raised an expectation of dual professionals, in that new

academics would be expected to conform to the norms and conventions of their discipline, but would also acquire professional teaching status through a formal qualification. Trowler and Knight (2000) and Knight, Tait & Yorke (2006) argue for the potential power of departmental/disciplinary ways of 'coming to know' (Trowler and Knight, 2000) and we have seen in the argument put forward here the importance of departments as mediating the socialisation experience. However, with an almost universal requirement in UK universities that new academics undertake a professional teaching qualification as part of their probationary procedures, the role of this practice should also, finally, be noted.

There is no correlation between discipline or socialisation trajectory and view of the PGCert. In other words, those with resonant experiences find their teaching qualifications anywhere on the spectrum from useful to otherwise, as do those with dissonant or rejection trajectories. Three clear messages of concern emerge from the data, however, that can be abstracted in the same way as the rest of the data in this article. Firstly, the mismatch between the aims of the PGCert and the lived reality of experiences in specific departments can be a cause of stress and troublesomeness, in a similar way that Trowler and Cooper (2002) have suggested in their notion of competing 'teaching and learning regimes'. In this regard, the philosophy and practice of the teaching qualification is unhelpfully removed from departmental ethos and practice. Secondly, the PGCert can be a form of support for some, as a way of reconceptualising or reaffirming their practices in relation to the community of practice they have joined. Commonly, this manifests itself in interview by those with resonant experiences as a further way of professionalising themselves and satisfying competence standards in the teaching aspects of their role. For others, in dissonant and rejection positions, rather than professionalisation, the talk is ideological in nature, allowing a return to concern for the educational enterprise.

The third and final message from the data is unfortunate. The propensity for PGCerts to bring colleagues together from across the institution is often seen as a benefit by those

who run them, but this can lead to unhelpful misperceptions elsewhere in the academy (Comber and Walsh, 2008) or amongst participants themselves. The result, whether the cross-discipline conversations are welcome or otherwise, is that the process enables a sharing of departmental experiences that highlight inequities in practice. The realisation that probation is locally determined, and variably enacted, simply adds to the stress, uncertainty and distrust noted above.

## **Conclusions**

Probation is a long-standing but under-researched process in UK universities that, superficially at least, has retained its character for nearly 40 years. By investigating individual academics' socialisation experiences, this study raises some issues about the nature and equity of the probationary period that virtually all new academics undergo in the UK. In relation to this, two major conclusions are drawn, two practical implications offered and two suggestions for further research are proffered.

First, departmental influences are fundamental. Where these are unpropitious, experience can be very negative. As Knight, Tait & Yorke (2006) argue, the value of informal learning is important to new academics. However, if there appears to be no coherent or welcoming community, this aspect is lost. Taking this situation to its logical conclusion, supported by the data gathered in this study, individuals who find themselves in departments lacking the kinds of collegiality that Trowler and Knight (2000) suggest is important, undergo a very stressful transition. Just when new academics need to be focusing on developing and asserting their academic identities, they are beset by uncertainty and a lack of productivity, diverted as they are by contemplating alternatives to academic life.

The second conclusion relates to the practice of probation itself, rather than the wider context. The inequities uncovered by this study require scrutiny. If we are adamant that we have developed fair and equal probationary criteria, it is clear from the data generated here that our new colleagues are conscious of unfortunate differences. Whilst it would be perfectly reasonable to expect different criteria, practices and processes across a range of institutions, it is regrettable to find such variability within institutions. The recent introduction of professional teaching qualifications, which often allow for intimate discussions of institutional practices, may thus be inadvertent sites for producing contention, stress and disharmony.

In terms of implications for practice, UK universities may wish to consider undertaking focused institutional research that uncovers the variety of probationary procedures in use. When an institution has an up-to-date picture of how probation is enacted for new lecturers, it may prove beneficial to make this more transparent. Given the dissonance experienced by new academics who transfer between different sectors of UK higher education (old, new, middle-aged), it may also be beneficial to pay attention to induction, especially to make clear where practices might be expected to vary. Greater attention to the assumptions underpinning the nature of UK universities' cultural practices and how these are enacted may make transition less difficult for many new appointees.

It is suggested, therefore, that further research is needed to determine the 'cost' of probation in its broadest sense. This would include the very real costs of recruitment, but also the softer costs in terms of retention and/or lost productivity attributable to the uncertain positions in which probationary academics find themselves. This idea relates to the notion of opportunity cost, in which the ambiguous role of the new academic signifies paths not taken due to the uncertainties of the future. It is also suggested that institutional probationary processes need revisiting. Whilst there is no suggestion here that the current 'two sizes fit

all' (referring to the differences between older and newer institutions), should be aligned, the disparity in practice within institutions is a concern.

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Institutional Type	STEM <sup>1</sup>	SocSci <sup>2</sup>
Old	3	3
Middle-aged (1960s expansion)	7	5
New (1990s expansion)	2	3

Table 1: A breakdown of participants in the study

<sup>1</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths

<sup>2</sup> Social Sciences including academic (geography, sociology) and professionally oriented subjects (teaching, law)

<b>Resonant</b>	<b>Dissonant</b>	<b>Rejection</b>
Focused	Infantilised	Gatekeepers
Huge opportunities	Uncooperative	Politics and nitpicking
Friendly department	Managerialist	Peculiar environment
Career choice	Lacking collegiality	Customer/service
Strategic	Outraged	Silo mentality

Figure 1: An emergent typology of academic socialisation

#### **Word count**

Abstract	150
Article	6924
References	587
<b>Total</b>	<b>7661</b>