



Navigating the neo-academy: Experiences of liminality and identity construction among early career researchers at one Australian regional university

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Abstract

Across the world, many university-based early career researchers (ECRs) are experiencing an unprecedented intensification of research expectations on transition from doctoral research to academic life. Countries such as Australia have put into place national frameworks of research excellence to remain globally competitive. Pressure on universities to elevate global research rankings has soared, with many regional universities and disciplines such as education responding with a rapid escalation of research performance expectations for academics. Consequently, concerns have been raised for ECRs embroiled in intensified research agendas in these contexts. Framed by concepts of liminality and identity construction, we argue that intensified expectations do not take account of liminality experienced by ECRs during times of transition, compromising perceived academic progress. We report on the identity journeys of ECRs in a School of Education at one regional Australian university. Data was collected from nine ECRs using online focus groups and analysed using a hybrid thematic approach. Key findings indicate that ECRs transition into the Academy post-doctorate with varying experiences of identity liminality that impact their capacity to manage research expectations. ECRs experiencing shorter periods of liminality are best positioned to manage the intensified expectations of academic life while ECRs experiencing persistent liminality and identity ‘struggle’ are more likely to perceive a diminished sense of achievement and support. These findings have significant implications for university leadership and research supervisors, in Australia and globally, regarding the ways they support ECRs to productively navigate the hyper-invigilated audit cultures of what we have termed the neo-academy.

Keywords Early career researcher · Identity construction · Liminality · Education · Regional universities · Academy

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Introduction

Early career researchers (ECRs) are most typically defined within the literature as those within 5 years of their PhD conferral (Australian Research Council [ARC], 2020). Despite their novitiate status, ECRs in the employ of university contexts are required to meet amplified research expectations alongside their more experienced colleagues, while concurrently navigating the complexities of academic life that often includes substantial teaching workloads, building research capacities (Zipin & Nuttall, 2016) and importantly, continuing the journey of researcher identity development (Castelló et al., 2020). Regional university settings, and particular disciplines such as education, have been identified as conspicuous sites of rapidly escalated research performance expectations in a bid to remain competitive (Rogers & Swain, 2021).

This paper responds to calls from researchers in Australia (Mantai, 2017, 2019) and internationally (Damico et al., 2018; Kenny, 2017) for research that deepens understandings of the impact of these intensified pressures on ECRs “navigating the tensions of beginning their careers embedded in the neo-liberal program of reform” (Damico et al., 2018, p. 828). Through the lens of Beech’s (2011) conceptualisation of liminality and identity construction (that is, the state of in-betweenness and disorientation that may be experienced during times of identity transition), we specifically address the ways in which university-based ECRs experience liminality during the shift from doctoral candidate to ECR in the prevailing performance-focused context and the ways these experiences serve to enhance and compromise their perceived academic success. We argue that intensified expectations on ECRs transitioning into the neo-academy do not take account of liminality experiences and thus perceived academic progress may be put at risk. This paper responds to the following research question:

How do education early career researchers’ experiences of liminality during their transition from higher degree to early career researcher impact their ability to manage and meet the expectations of the neo-academy?

Much extant identity research involves ECRs non-specific to education (Enright & Facer, 2017; Hollywood et al., 2020) and/or within the context of precarious academic employment (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015). In contrast, this paper draws on findings from a qualitative research study involving nine ECRs already in the employ of one Australian regional university in the School of Education. In doing so, we elucidate the identity experiences of a specific and less represented group of ECRs at the coalface of heightened performance agendas. Data was collected from nine participants using three online focus group interviews and analysed using a hybrid (inductive and deductive) thematic approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

In the following sections, we firstly discuss the background to this study, thus elucidating our use of the term neo-academy. We then review the literature related to ECR experiences, and subsequently explain the conceptual framework for this study. We then identify the methods employed for data collection and

analysis, followed by a discussion of the key findings. In concluding, we highlight the implications of these findings for policy and practice in university settings.

Background

Many contemporary early career researchers (ECRs) across the globe experience measures of performance that have been significantly intensified with the “neoliberal turn” of Higher Education in the past two decades (Tight, 2019, p. 273). Countries across Europe, the United Kingdom, United States, Asia, and Africa have adopted neo-liberally driven market-based approaches to Higher Education, “evidenced by an emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits” (Olsenn & Peters, 2005, p. 313). Our usage of ‘neo-academy’ seeks to capture the essence of a context besieged by unprecedented and substantially heightened expectations; a situation in which Kenny (2017) cautions researchers may lose motivation, and diverse intellectual inquiry (Giroux, 2014, p. 20) is at risk of being replaced by research and researchers that have “metric power” (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018).

Higher Education in Australia offers a clear case in point of neo-liberal effect. Excellence in Research for Australia [ERA] (ARC, 2015) is an evaluative framework that reviews and measures each universities’ publication outputs. The more recent addition of the Engagement and Impact (EI) assessment (ARC, 2015) goes further to assess how well university academics are translating their research into economic, social, environmental, cultural, and other impacts. These measures are used to determine Government research funding allocations and are therefore of significant consequence to universities across Australia.

In 2019, the research expectations for Australian universities were exponentially heightened with the release of the Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards, instigated by the Australian Government to ensure that higher education standards remained comparable with international benchmarks. Also referred to as the Coaldrake Report (2019), recommendations included the adoption of a clearer definition around what constituted a “university”, with Recommendation 5 stating:

Along with teaching, the undertaking of research is, and should remain, a defining feature of what it means to be a university in Australia; a threshold benchmark of quality and quantity of research should be included in the Higher Education Provider Category Standards. This threshold benchmark for research quality should be augmented over time (Coaldrake, 2019, p. vii).

Research clearly became the prioritised function of all universities.

Regional universities, in particular, have been significantly impacted by this Report (Aprile et al., 2020). With many traditionally less competitive in research than their top tier counterparts (Diezmann, 2018), and in some cases known more predominantly as teaching universities (Rogers & Swain, 2021), many regional universities immediately began to amplify performative policy around research

productivity in a bid to improve their measurable research outputs. As warned by Dougherty and Natow (2020, p. 465), under this metric-based regimen, universities are at risk of being seen as “winners or losers, leaders or laggards”, meaning that regional universities, regardless of potential financial, geographical, demographic or axiomatic differences, are forced to compete with elite institutions.

Additional pressure has ensued for specific disciplines within the Academy. Notable among these is education where research rankings have been, for some universities, traditionally low (Diezmann, 2018); a situation exacerbated by a misalignment between how education research performance is measured and the nature of education research itself (Seddon et al., 2013). Forced to rethink what counts in education research from a ranking perspective, many universities have rushed to set ambitious performance targets (Diezmann, 2018) for those working in this amplified education research environment, with ECRs embroiled in the pressures of hyper-invigorated audit cultures.

Early career researcher experiences

One of the immediate challenges facing ECRs as they transition from their doctoral research status is the procurement of secure employment, whether within or outside of the Academy (Rogers & Swain, 2021). Significantly however, even where ECRs hold academic positions within the Academy, studies have reported concerns about excessive workloads, with ECRs required to “do more and run faster” (Peterson, 2011, p. 36), and a lack of quality support offered to achieve this (Locke et al., 2016). Many in Locke et al.’s (2016) study felt that their doctoral experience had not equipped them to prepare grant applications, publish in the highest quality journals, network or develop the kinds of skills they now needed in the Academy, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, project and time management. The contemporary ECR is expected to be multi-skilled, flexible, innovative and entrepreneurial, responsible for developing their own career and a talented collaborator and capable of interdisciplinary research mobility (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2018). In short, they need to be and do more than ever before.

An emergence of research into the experiences of ECRs has ensued (Castelló et al., 2020), given concerns over the potential impact of neoliberal institutional cultures. Shahjahan (2020, p. 787) argues that neoliberal moves have created a “precarity norm” where temporal constraints coupled with intensified expectations leave ECRs fearing they will fail to reach an academic bar metricised in outputs. Kenny (2017, p. 900) concurs, stating that ECRs need to be allowed to “grow into their jobs”. Instead, this “fast academy” (Shahjahan, 2020, p. 791) elevates the focus on individual performativity. In 2013, Australian researchers reporting on the impact of ERA rankings on education research (Seddon et al., 2013, p. 435) identified lowered researcher morale and professional disadvantage as the “unintended consequences” of Australia’s audit culture, drawing specific attention to early career researchers.

In this environment, ECRs perceive they must “hustle harder and impress sooner” (Zipin & Nuttall, 2016, p. 352) than ever before. At a time when ECRs need encouragement, conditions may serve to “disqualify” rather than “capacitate” ECRs and as

a consequence, “undershoot the long-term regeneration of the field” (Zipin & Nuttall, 2016, p. 359). Zipin and Nuttall (2016) warn this untimely focus on the “alpha” researcher, at a time when the ECR is still developing their own capacities and identity as a researcher, may “cruel” the hopes and aspirations of ECRs.

Early career researcher identity

Given professional identity has been shown to drive individual’s professional behaviour (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Mockler, 2011), it would follow that ECR identity is significant to their work in the neo-academy. Identity as a concept has been used to frame several studies on ECRs over the last two decades. A large proportion of these studies are primarily concerned with *who* ECRs perceive themselves to be; that is, as a particular type of researcher, with doctoral students strongly represented. For example, Monereo and Leisa (2020) reported on the self-perceived I-positions of Spanish social science doctoral candidates across seven distinct researcher identities: manager, research designer, research community member, administrator, tutored-student, academic writer, subject content learner, and academic speaker. Similarly, Mantai’s (2017) study of Australian doctoral students reports on the extent to which they felt they were a “Researcher”, constructed from their personally perceived “market value” in an academy predisposed to metricised appraisal.

Other studies have had a stronger focus on ECRs, yet maintain a perspective of identity orientation, framed primarily in the context of work precarity. Enright and Facer (2017), for example, categorise identity orientations as the “Disciplinary”, “Worker Bee” and “Social Activist” in their UK study of casualised ECRs. In a rare study specific to education, categories such as “student-neophyte” and “academic” are used by Djerasimovic and Villani (2020) in their recent European study of ECRs. The participants in their study included doctoral candidates, post-doctoral researchers and lecturers in education who had experienced high levels of mobility to access employment. These researchers refer, in part, to ECRs experiences of liminality and identification driven by a search for belonging.

Another smaller group of studies speak more specifically to identity construction itself. Focusing on the journey of identity formation and re-formation, these studies are again heavily located in the context of limited employment opportunities. In a number of cases, studies have taken an affective approach, such as Broeckerhoff and Lopes (2020), who emphasise feelings of failure in the becoming process, with Skakni and McAlpine’s (2017, p. 205) describing it as an “emotionally rocky road”. McAlpine and Emmioğlu (2015) similarly explored the precariousness of employment, this time in the sciences, and the discouragement that comes with constrained opportunities. From a different perspective, Shahjahan (2020) highlighted the process of becoming for ECRs with employment, and their shame as a consequence of feeling unworthy with the heavy gaze of the academy upon them.

In our paper, we contribute to this identity construction focus though through the address of ECRs in employment within the neo-academy. Using a contextually sensitive conceptual framework of liminality, we specifically investigate the

identity journeys of education ECRs in the employ of one regional university in Australia where the gaze of the neo-academy is conspicuous for reasons previously outlined.

A liminality framework

We first reference the work of Castello et al.'s (2020) identity dimensions to clearly articulate the identity stance of this work. In doing so, we draw specifically on Castello et al.'s dimensions of identity stability (stable through to dynamic identities) and locus (identities informed by the individual and/or context). We conceptualise identity as a process of dynamic becoming, and constitutive of an inherent tension between the individual (their aspirations, values and beliefs) and the social context (expectations, accountabilities and performative requirements) they inhabit. However, in the context of this study, we concur with Mantai's (2017) argument that the process of *becoming* (reconstructing and reshaping one's researcher identity) for contemporary ECRs is concurrent to the immediate demand for *doing* (performing and achieving as per university expectations). Where ECRs experience liminality and identity instability, this tension between *becoming* and *doing* is exacerbated.

We draw on Beech's (2011) conceptualisation of liminality as the underpinning conceptual frame for thinking and talking about identity construction. While liminality has been referred to in some early career researcher literature (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020), it has most often been utilised in studies on organisational change (Willis et al., 2021), and career progression (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). Beech (2011, pp. 296–297) specifically links liminality to identity construction, explaining liminality as “a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that is meaningful for the individual and their community”. Grounded in the seminal work of social anthropologist Victor Turner (1967), liminality is explained to occur during one's passage across a threshold from one identity state to another, creating a state of “in-betweenness”, disorientation and loss of sensed belonging in a social space. Further work on liminality from Ybema et al (2011), in collaboration with Beech, elucidates two liminality states termed transitional (a temporary state) and perpetual (ongoing and without reprieve), with extended experiences of liminality compromising individuals' ability to effectively move forward.

In view of contextual pressures of the neo-academy previously outlined, the concept of liminality presents as a powerful lens through which to think about ECR identity construction as they cross the threshold from doctoral researcher into the performative expectations of the neo-academy. To this end, we draw together the concept of liminality and the context of the neo-academy to present the contextually sensitive conceptual framework utilised for the analysis and discussion of findings in the study at hand (Fig. 1). In doing so, we contribute a context specific framework for ECR experience into the field.

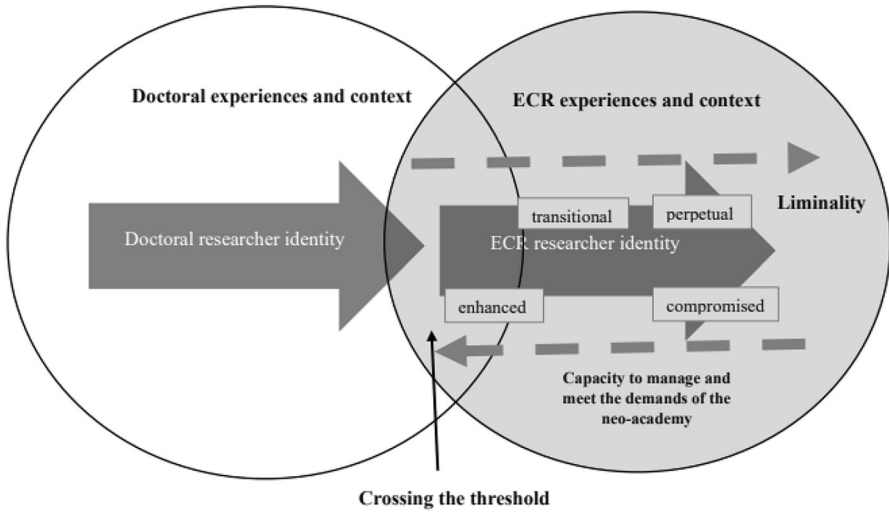


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework drawing from Beech's (2011) conceptualisation of liminality

Researching early career researchers in education

This research is grounded in an interpretative paradigm which draws on the subjective and uniquely human interpretation of experience and context (Altheide & Johnson, 2011). We sought to capture the participants' understandings about their identity experiences as they progressed into the academy. This research was conducted as per ethics approval provided by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee (H20REA132).

Participants

Participants were recruited from the School of Education in one regional university in Queensland, Australia, all with academic positions with teaching (undergraduate and post-graduate courses) and research work allocations. Participants came from a range of specialisations within the School of Education, including Curriculum and Pedagogy, Arts Education, Technology, Guidance and Counselling, Community Education and Research Education. They commenced their positions in a variety of ways, some having been employed by the university pre-PhD conferral, and some employed immediately after this completion (see Table 1). Several of the participants completed their PhD at this same university. All participants had completed their PhD within the past 5 years, with some only just recently conferred and others nearing the end of the five-year period (See Table 1).

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Participant (gender neutral pseudonym)	Number of years as ECR	Employment pre or post conferral	PhD through this university yes/no
Jaye	1	Pre	Yes
Jordan	2	Pre	Yes
Cameron	3	Pre	No
Drew	4	Pre	Yes
Glen	2	Post	Yes
Jesse	4	Post	Yes
Morgan	2	Post	Yes
Rory	4	Post	No
Taylor	3	Post	Yes

Data collection

Three 45-min focus group interviews with three participants in each were conducted online over a period of two weeks by the first named author. Participants were asked to reflect on their move into the ECR space post-completion of their doctoral research. Questions included:

1. How did you feel about yourself as a researcher when you completed your PhD?
2. What were your aspirations as a researcher?
3. What were your early experiences of being an ECR in a university setting?
4. What was the impact of that on you and your research work?

Heterogeneous groups involving participants from different specialisations and with different time as an ECR were organised in order that difference and similarity of experience could emerge. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed using a transcription service. Following transcription, a manual hybrid analysis of interview data was undertaken based on Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) combined inductive and deductive approach in order to leverage the value of the concepts central to the framework of the research and emergent codes (see Fig. 2).

Through the lens of the conceptual framework for this paper (Fig. 1), three key findings were identified: 1. ECRs experience liminality along a continuum (inconspicuous, temporary and persistent) as they transition from doctoral to ECR context, 2. ECRs experiences of liminality impact their perceptions of progress in the neo-academy, and 3. The neo-academy appears to privilege ECRs experiencing minimal liminality in this transition.

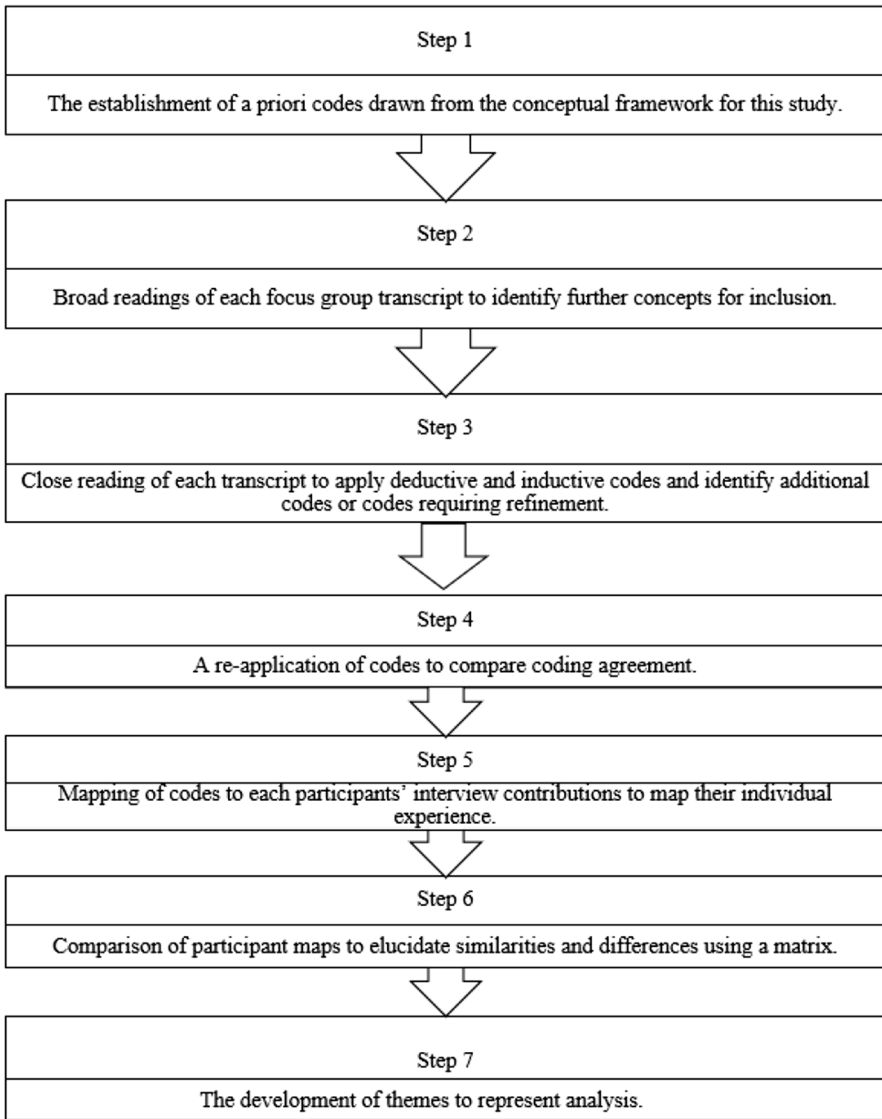


Fig. 2 Steps for data analysis adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane’s (2006) hybrid thematic analysis

Findings and discussion

In the first section, we present and discuss findings one and two, connecting the three experiences of liminality demonstrated by these participants (inconspicuous, temporary, and persistent) with their perceived researcher progress. Finding

three is then presented and discussed, drawing attention to the tension between liminal experience and the neo-academy.

A continuum of liminality experience, identity construction and perceived researcher progress

Previous reports of the elation of completing one's doctoral research (Peterson, 2011; Weise et al., 2020) similarly resonated with the ECRS in our study, as Cameron's comment illustrates:

I was happy [laugh] the whole process had finally come to an end, and I really didn't believe it until I got a piece of paper that was official.

Jaye and Drew similarly described the "unbelievable pressure", explaining that "there's a whole lot of relief about finishing, passing, getting it done." However, their experiences after this point were less homologous.

In a very few cases, ECRs reported an almost *inconspicuous* experience of liminality when crossing the threshold between doctoral researcher and ECR. For others, liminality was experienced as *temporary*, while for some it was *persistent*, with ECRs perceiving themselves to be suspended in a state of identity limbo for an extended period of time. The conceptual framework (Fig. 1), drawing heavily on the language used by Beech (2011) and Ybema et al. (2011), was reconsidered based on these findings, to align to the participant's experiences more accurately. Our study revealed an uninterrupted identity journey not addressed in their work, along with experiences more temporally based than the term "transitional" implies, while other experiences of liminality, while extended, could not be assumed to carry the level of permanency implicative in Ybema et al.'s (2011) usage of the word "perpetual".

Inconspicuous liminality

Of the nine participants in the study, two ECRs spoke to an almost seamless transition from their doctoral research to becoming an ECR. While marked ritualistically through the graduation process (Turner, 1967), the period of liminality that can follow whereby an intermediate space opens between 'who we were and who we are going to be' was not conspicuous for these ECRS. Instead, their passage was virtually uninterrupted. For these ECRs, the transition meant "business as usual" (Jesse). Jesse explained,

I was really motivated. I had all these plans, all the journal articles that I was going to publish and all the bits of the thesis that were going to go into different journals. I was really raring to go.

Jesse felt sure about what research they would continue to do, spilling directly out of their PhD. They felt a strong sense of who they were, and the kind of research that they aspired to do moving forward. As Jesse stated, "it is not like I became someone different. I just did not have a thesis hanging over my head". The need to rethink, review or disrupt their identity as a researcher was not a consideration, and for the most part, they intended to carry on with their research as they had been.

Glen similarly intended to build on the research identity they progressively constructed during their PhD, feeling there was “so much more to do, to offer, to pursue”. They were excited to keep moving in the same research direction and while recognising they would develop in other ways, felt a sense of certainty about who they wanted to be and the journey they would take, “at least for now”. Glen made clear their desire to “keep moving forward” assisted by a strong sense of direction, purpose and plan.

For ECRs experiencing inconspicuous liminal identity journeys, the transition signals an opportunity to continue the research journey commenced within the PhD. In essence, some identity journeys are reasonably streamlined, or stable (Castelló et al., 2020). Previous identity research, such as that by Ashforth et al. (2016), speaks to how overlapping or integrated identities assist to make transitions or “boundary-crossing” more manageable. In this instance, ECRs are more ready to tackle the expectations of the neo-academy unencumbered by a perceived need to consciously reinvent or reconsider their researcher direction at that time, reducing the effort required to segue into the ECR space (Tomo, 2019). As Jesse stated, “I have always known who I am and what I want to do”. In many ways, these ECRs were able to leverage their previous work, networks and publications. As Glen explained,

I didn't stop. I just continued with networks that I had already established. I just took it further, I took it outside of the PhD, and I still do...I continue to publish with both my supervisors. I feel fortunate to be a part of such a powerful team.

In short, they felt a steady sense of progress, of moving forward, assisted by a strong sense of identity. At that crucial point of transition, they were comfortable with their existing identities and consequently more able to focus on research action.

Temporary liminality

For many of the participants, the transition into the ECR space from their doctoral completion, despite their employment in a university, represented a period of identity ‘disruption’. These ECRs felt unsure that they wanted to continue in the same research direction, questioning who they wanted to be as researchers, what they wanted to stand for and where they wanted to go in their research. They did not question their identities as researchers at a broad level; rather, they were challenged to define their more specific identities as an ECR and did not feel the same sense of direction and purpose that they had felt during their doctorate.

Morgan described this period of identity disruption as a “lull”, unsure where they wanted to focus their “research time and effort”. Having decided to move away from their PhD focus, this left them “wondering where to go, and what to do”. Cameron, also electing to move on to new topics of research, found themselves “grabbing this and grabbing that” without really knowing how it connected to their work as a researcher. The decision to explore a new pathway as a researcher created a sense of disorientation and deflation.

They believed, however, that this “feeling would end” (Morgan) and saw the situation they found themselves in as an opportunity to be reinvigorated. As Cameron explained,

You spend all this time doing your PhD and you love the work you have done. But at the end, you feel a sense of ground-hog day-ness, for want of a better word. I wanted to have a bit of a fresh look at what I might like to do. The problem is, I am going at a snail’s pace.

For those experiencing temporary liminality, it was seen on one hand as a positive, acting as “a trigger” (Beech, 2011, p. 287) that invited them to consider alternative researcher identities. On the other hand, it created a sense of frustration and anxiety that they were “going too slow” (Morgan) as an ECR, less ready to engage in the immediate action expected of them by the neo-academy. Instead, their identity journey is one that requires time and space to pause, reflect, and explore who they are and who they might be at this new juncture (Ashforth et al., 2000; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Significantly, immediate research outputs may be less likely during this “gradual dawning” (Beech, 2011).

Morgan, for instance, described their progress since completing their PhD as slow.

I still don’t have a research team. I’m still in the same place. I have talked to different people within our school who are in the research, but I still don’t feel like I’m any closer to anything.

Morgan was, however, open to these things “taking time”.

Cameron, despite feeling they had started making some headway, still raised concerns that they were “treading water” while Jordan described “fumbling around in the dark and trying to just work it out” as they sought to understand both their own identities, aspirations and how to make this happen. While frustrated and anxious about the delay, they did not see this liminal experience as anything extraordinary. Temporary liminality for these ECRs was seen as a natural part of the “rite of passage” (Turner, 1967) from one identity stage to the next. Their concerns lay in the fact that “we have to get runs on the board sooner rather than later”. In other words, the neo-academy was tapping its foot.

Persistent liminality

In the case of some ECRs, “identity disruption” extended to “identity struggle”. Drew, as a case in point, felt as if they were professionally adrift like “a balloon that has lost its air”. They explained:

I just had this sense of, “I don’t know what to do now. Where do I go? I felt like my PhD was very complete. As to what else I wanted to find out about my field, I hadn’t really come across an idea. I was still searching. I have been searching for a long time.

Similarly, Jaye had also decided to reinvent their research focus yet was still uncertain of what that might be after two years. Jaye described the experience as “stepping into this no man’s land”, labelling the ECR space as “a bit of a black hole”. Struggling to “even articulate where to now or what that actually looks like”, their lack of clarity around who they were, where they wanted to head and “what [they] wanted to be known for” negatively impacted both their motivation and engagement with their research work.

For example, without a clear identity, Jaye felt hamstrung with regard to publishing and networking, sharing her specific concern that she was unable to develop the publication pathway required of her as an ECR without any clear idea of what direction to take. The demand to work collaboratively was also identified by these ECRs as challenging in the absence of a clear researcher identity, as they were unsure to which ‘tribe’ they should or could connect. Robbins et al. (2018) reported similar challenges for ECRs where there were not ready-made collaborations in place post-doctorate. As Drew explained, “You don’t know where you fit but you are being told that you must fit!”. In this ongoing “liminal state of in-between-ness” (Beech, 2011, p. 285), ECRs can experience high anxiety. Jaye and Drew both felt that they did not belong.

Ybema et al.’s (2011) and Beech’s (2011) work on perpetual liminality resonates here, whereby these extended periods of time seriously disrupt the individual’s sense of self and place, requiring that the individual be able to engage in extensive identity work to make their way through this state of disorientation and ambiguity. While temporary liminality can simultaneously represent a stage of confusion and excitement for a reinvigorated future identity, persistent liminality can create feelings of being lost and isolated. This persistent experience of identity liminality is reflective of the experiences of casualised doctoral and ECR researchers reported in previous research (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020), demonstrating that similar identity journeys can be experienced even in the context of employment in the Academy.

Liminality and the neo-academy

Many ECRs perceive the negative impact of liminality during identity construction as heightened due to the expectations of the preferred institutional researcher. Where researcher identities formed during the doctoral stage dovetailed into the ECR space, they were more likely to see their way clear to demonstrate these institutionally preferred researcher identities in a timely manner. In other words, they perceive “a more even interplay” (Beech, 2011, p. 289), between their internal experience of identity construction and the demands of the context in which they work.

In cases where ECRs enter the university neo-academy without a strong sense of identity to draw on, they feel more vulnerable amid perceptions of failing to demonstrate what it means to be a successful academic. The participants experiencing more conspicuous liminality also perceived that despite requiring it, there was little support for the dynamic reconstruction of their researcher identities. Instead, time to reflect (that is, engage in the thinking of identity construction) in any intentional way was compromised by their heavy workload, university expectations and

a lack of preparedness to navigate the complexities of the academy. As in previous studies (Nicholson & Lander, 2020; Rogers & Swain, 2021), both Rory and Morgan felt overwhelmed by the range of academic responsibilities, particularly teaching compounding the pressure of intensified academic performance expectations. Dugas et al. (2020) similarly report on the simultaneous pull between teaching and research occurring in regional universities, where research expectations have escalated but teaching expectations have not decreased. More specifically, Jaye lamented that these pressures served to undermine opportunities to explore this new research space, explaining that amidst the institutional push to “get going” there was limited “time where you can explore what it is you really want to do from here on in”. “Feeling pressured to forge ahead all the time,” Taylor similarly felt that opportunities for identity exploration were compromised, stating,

I would like to have time where I can consolidate my work and build a really strong foundation of who I am as a researcher, what interests me, what direction I want to take and perhaps gently grow into meaningful research relationships that yield meaningful research. Instead, what I feel is that I need to be bigger, better, stronger as soon as possible. (Taylor)

This experience denies the time and space critical to the dynamic process of identity exploration (Engelbertink et al., 2021). The neo-academy appears to presuppose, and in some ways rely on, ECR identity journeys that will be homogeneously experienced as stable with minimal liminality, enabling them to make an uninterrupted transition into the ECR context and take up these preferred identities as “alpha” researchers (Zipin & Nuttall, 2016). Previous research has noted the tensions that exist where individual’s identities and preferred contextual identities lack synchronicity, resulting in feelings of disappointment, frustration and lowered self-efficacy (Day, 2018). This study highlights that these tensions can also occur where opportunities do not exist for ECRs to review and explore their identities as researchers. Such tensions impel a reconsideration of liminality as a deficit, and instead, give rise to a conceptualisation of liminality as an often inherent and potentially rich opportunity, if supported, for identity work.

Implications

Policymakers, universities and supervisory teams working in regional contexts all have a part to play in considering the implications of these findings. Where institutional contexts continue to heighten performance expectations but simultaneously fall short of taking account of ECR’s heterogeneous identity journeys and experience of liminality, the progress of ECRs will be compromised and, at worst, these universities may lose the very researchers that could contribute meaningfully and substantially to the field. Realistically, it seems unlikely that the current research expectations will abate. Policymakers will need to reconsider current definitions of the ECR to acknowledge the ECR “stage” may be prolonged for some as time is needed to pause and engage in the thinking required for identity reconstruction. Current policy based on definitions of the ECR as time-bound are predicated on

uninterrupted identity journeys which allow for ECR research action to be more expeditious.

Ideally, universities will respect the time and space needed for the identity work of the ECR to be undertaken, as well as recognise the need to provide personalised support based upon the experiences of the ECR in the preparation for this transition. A homogenous approach will fall short of empowering those, on the one hand, who are well-positioned to move forward while, on the other hand, supporting those experiencing a sense of disorientation and disconnect. To this end, the role of the supervisor needs to better reflect the changing context into which ECRs transition to include strategic guidance, opportunities and mentoring prior to and potentially after doctoral completion. Doctoral candidates will benefit from being made aware of their own need to be future-focused as they move toward to conclusion of their candidacy, in order that they have engaged in essential thinking about their research futures.

Limitations

This research study is not without limitations that should be considered when deliberating on its findings. Firstly, the study was contextualised in one regional university setting and therefore may not represent the experiences of other researchers from other universities or settings. Additionally, this study involves a relatively small sample size, intentional for the purpose of this study to gather rich data. We welcome contributing studies that may take this research to alternate contexts, including other disciplines areas and larger-scale studies.

Conclusion

Drawing on findings from a qualitative study conducted in one regional university in Queensland, Australia, this article reports on the lived experiences of early career researchers working in the School of Education at a time of elevated performative research pressure. While this study has been undertaken in the Australian context, this is not a circumstance limited to Australia; rather, it is an issue of priority across all nations where global research competition has created a new academic reality for ECRs. In this study, we conceptualised identity through the lens of liminality. This conceptual framework was used to investigate the different ways in which ECRs in education experienced their identity journeys and the perceived impact of these journeys on their progress in a performative university research context. Findings highlight the tension between assumed and lived identity journeys between the university context and some ECRs, and the potential disconnect that ensues between the kind of support that ECRs need, and the support processes that may be in place. Findings also prompt more careful consideration of how experiences of liminality are viewed, and responded to, in the context of the neo-academy; as an opportunity for identity work or an obstacle to timely progress, a site for support or isolating terrain for ECRs. A review of both policy and practice approaches is needed so that

they may better reflect the identity challenges of the transition into the contemporary ECR context.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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