Check for updates

'Playing the same game differently': constituting academic identities in four disciplines

Linlin Xu[1,2] · **Mark Barrow**[2]

Abstract

Whilst many studies have explored academic identity construction, very few take a comparative perspective to examine the various ways of constructing academic identities within and across different disciplines. This paper analyses a key policy document used for evaluating academics' performance along with semi-structured interviews with 37 academics from Chemical Sciences, Medical Sciences, Nursing and Education working in a research-intensive New Zealand university. The use of Foucault's theoretical construct of *games of truth* provides a novel perspective to investigate the ways in which academics in different disciplines play the academic 'game' and how this might affect their construction of an academic identity. Our analysis suggests that the path into academia is a key factor in their trajectory of academic formation. The study suggests three types of 'valid' academics. It problematises the standardised definition and evaluation of academics and offers contextualised, multiple, dynamic and agential understandings of being and becoming set up through the interplay of forces arising from disciplinary, institutional, professional and personal spheres.

Keywords Academic identities · Games of truth · Disciplines · Foucault

Introduction

Identity, 'being recognised as a certain "kind of person" in a given context' (Gee, 2000, p. 99), is an important analytic tool for understanding the contextualised ways in which people act and interact. Identity 'was born as a problem', which has shifted from 'how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable' in modernity to 'how to avoid fixation and keep the options open' in postmodernity (Bauman, 1996, p. 18). Being a slippery and complex notion, identity becomes a concern whenever.

✉ Linlin Xu
  linlin.xu@auckland.ac.nz

1   School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, China

2   Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

⌂ Springer

one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. (Bauman, 1996, p. 19)

How academics in different disciplines place themselves among the 'variety of behavioural styles and patterns' and, based on this, how others recognise (or are expected to recognise) them as the 'right and proper' academics are of immediate concern in this study.

We focus on the perceptions and experiences of practising academics from four disciplinary groupings in one New Zealand university as part of an ongoing inquiry into the vexed question of academic identity and its formation. We are interested in understanding the variety of academic identities and their formation from the point of view of different epistemological assumptions derived from varied disciplinary norms and cultures, broadening the empirical ambit of academic identity research that generally draws on social sciences (Barrow et al., 2020). In this article, we review the literature that shapes our research focus and introduce a theoretical framework, through which we understand and interpret our data: the institution's *Academic Standards* policy and interviews with 37 academics from schools of Chemical Science, Medical Science, Nursing and Education. Our discussion offers a snapshot of identity construction, brought about through the interplay of forces from disciplinary, institutional, professional and personal spheres.

Academic identity and discipline

In addressing the 'variety of behavioural styles and patterns' that are perceived as 'right and proper' (Bauman, 1996, p. 19), scholars have conceptualised academic identity in various ways. For example, it has been understood as multifaceted, dynamic, social (Mertkan & Bayrakli, 2018), local and contextual (Clegg, 2008). Academic identity formation is viewed as a process that is 'complex, rich, holistic and situated in nature' (Pick et al., 2017, p. 1175) with a mix of purposive and reactive identifications (Xu, 2023).

The literature suggests that the ambiguity and complexity of academic identity have intensified alongside ongoing structural and ideological changes occurring in higher education institutions (Page, 2020). In this context, traditional academic identity based on collegiality and academic autonomy is seen as being under threat (Clegg, 2008; Henkel, 2005) with new forms of identities in the making. In such a changing environment, tensions may arise out of value incongruence between individual academics and institutions in defining academics and their roles (Barrow & Xu, 2021; Winter, 2009), leading to increasingly fragmented academic identity (Pick et al., 2017). In neoliberal universities where narratives of loss, uncertainty and precarity prevail (Acker & Wagner, 2019), academics are often on a quest to (re)understand who they are and what it is that they do (Barrow et al., 2020). Moreover, the discourse of academia as a gendered space where women academics struggle to be visible (Acker & Wagner, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2020) may further complicate the formation of academic identity.

Among the substantial number of studies examining academic identity, those that use empirical data tend to draw on participants in a narrow range of disciplines, mainly the social sciences (broadly defined) (Barrow et al., 2020). The restricted epistemological base from which researchers draw empirical data has led to a partial view of the academy, leaving some ideas unchallenged and key voices unheard (Barrow et al., 2020). This might suggest that the complexity of academic identity formation is understated in the literature.

In this paper, we move beyond the social sciences and take a comparative approach to consider the experiences and voices of participants (academics) from both science and social science disciplines.

For many, disciplines are the heart of the university. With their own traditions and categories of thought, disciplines legitimate different social and cultural conditions privileging certain forms of knowledge creation and dissemination involving an interplay of contextualised knowing, doing and being (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The literature also reminds us that the strong boundaries that frame knowledge structures and thus define disciplines have partially dissolved to become more permeable and transgressive (Trowler, 2019). As the normative power of disciplines has been arguably weakened or diluted in today's managerial universities (Green, 2019; Trowler, 2019), academics may experience more fluid intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary relationships across departments, institutions, communities and the state (Henkel, 2005). Despite this, others argue, whilst the discipline's position as the guardian of academic culture faces challenges, disciplinary epistemological and ontological underpinnings still play a conditioning role in academic identity formation (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Green, 2019) and discipline remains 'a strong source of academic identity, in terms of what is important and what gives meaning and self-esteem' (Henkel, 2005 p. 173).

The changing discourses of discipline may add extra uncertainties to the constitution of academic identity and deserves attention. Therefore, our interest lies in exploring the extent to which discipline and pre-academic backgrounds might influence the shaping of academic identity and, in doing so, consider how they might be further complicating factors for researchers in this area.

Theoretical framework: 'games of truth'

Foucault's work has been increasingly used in discussions of identity and generated valuable research results and insights (e.g. Barrow & Xu, 2021; Tülübas & Göktürk, 2020). In this study, we draw on Foucault's (1980, 1997) theoretical construct of 'games of truth' to frame our discussion of the ways in which academics situated in different disciplines constitute themselves as academics. In the following section, we discuss the notion of 'truth', Foucault's shifting focus from the 'truth regime' to 'games of truth' and the ways in which we apply 'games of truth' to the current study.

Foucault understands truth 'as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements' (1980, p. 133). Truth is, therefore, 'the ensemble of rules' based on which 'the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true' (p. 132). Intrinsically, truth is associated with power, for truth is 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it—a "regime" of truth' (p. 133). Foucault (1980) argues that '[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth' (p. 131), by which he means,

> the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

For Foucault a game is 'a set of rules by which truth is produced' (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). The 'game of truth', therefore, refers to 'a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing' (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). That is, there is a set of procedures established and regulated on the basis of the truth, the principles and rules (e.g. the discourses accepted as true); one can enter and play the truth game by taking on different practices to comply with (or resist) these procedures to varying degrees. The result of doing so is that one is evaluated as valid or invalid, winning or losing against those principles and rules.

The notion, games of truth, is characterised by its dynamics and heterogeneity, as well as its focus on the subject's agency. In an interview with Becker, Foucault reflected,

> I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were truth games that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control. (Foucault, 1997, p. 281)

Truth games are never fixed or static but dynamic, with multiple possibilities for ongoing development. In a given truth game, 'it is always possible to discover something different and to more or less modify this or that rule, and sometimes even the entire game of truth' (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). Closely related to the dynamics and heterogeneity of the truth games is the agency of the subject—the main shift in Foucault's thinking in the move to 'games of truth' (Peters, 2004). Where regimes of truth involve 'coercive practice', games of truth highlight the 'practice of self-formation of the subject' (Foucault, 1997, p. 282) in which an agentic subject can escape 'from a domination of truth' by 'playing the same game differently, or playing another game… by showing its consequences, by pointing out that there are other reasonable options' (Foucault, 1997, p. 295).

The concept of truth games reveals, on the one hand, the discursive environment constituted by rules and regulations regarding what counts as true. On the other hand, it emphasises agential subjects and the practice of identity formation (or transformation) achieved through 'technologies of the self' that allow individuals 'by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves' (Foucault, 1988a, p. 18). In other words, the games of truth allow the possibility that subjects attain an understanding of and transform themselves through 'technologies of the self' permitting them to escape from the domination of 'truth' by interacting differently with the discursive rules and regulations.

By applying the concept of games of truth, we refine our research questions as follows: (1) what is the academic truth game that constitutes 'valid' academics? (2) How do academics working in Chemical Science, Medical Science, Nursing and Education play the academic truth game in order to be and become 'valid' academics? We believe the notion of games of truth offers us a useful lens that links rules (policies) and identity formation. In this manner, we hope to grapple with the complexity and entanglement of the academic truth game and explore the generative potential unleashed when academic subjects enter and play it.

The study

This is a qualitative study exploring how academics in different disciplines recognise and constitute themselves as 'valid' academics. It consisted of two phases—policy analysis and semi-structured interviews with 37 academics from four disciplinary groupings in a

research-intensive university in New Zealand. The study was given ethical approval by the case university's Human Participants Ethics Committee (reference number 021701).

The context

New Zealand's higher education system has experienced significant growth and change. One major shift is marked by educational reforms of the late twentieth century which aimed to strengthen links between education and economy (Stratford, 2019). These reforms have profoundly influenced higher education institutions' goals and policies, compelling universities to operate in ways inflected with increasing market rationale, emphasising economic impact, global rankings, intake of international students and research audit (Barrow & Grant, 2019; Stratford, 2019).

The case university is the country's highest ranked university according to a number of ranking agencies. Like all New Zealand universities, the case university participates in a national research assessment exercise, in place since 2003. The exercise determines the allocation of a quantum of research funding to institutions. A key component of the quality ranking is the performance of individual researchers with respect to research publication and its impact and their ability to attract research funding.

Policy analysis

The analysis of the policy aimed to answer the first research question by unveiling the key rules forming the academic truth game in the case university. We analysed a key policy, *Academic Standards for Research Fellows, Senior Research Fellows, Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors and Professors* (hereafter *Standards*). This policy 'outlines standards for academic grades as referred to in various HR policies covering these academic staff: including Appointments, Continuation, Promotions, and Academic Performance Review policies' (p. 2).

We examined the policy in relation to the rules and procedures that normalise academic culture, define and regulate academics and their roles. We conducted a two-level analysis. The first focused on rules that apply to academics in general; their engagement with three key areas (i.e. teaching, research, service and leadership) and main considerations of evaluation (e.g. disciplinary groupings and academic grades). At the second level, we took a comparative approach to examine how the rules were felt by or affected academics from different disciplinary groupings. We first compared the policy vertically to see how rules to assess academics change across academic grades but within one disciplinary grouping; then compared it horizontally to see how rules change to assess academics employed at the same grade but across disciplinary groupings.

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews aimed to answer the second research question—how academics in different disciplines play the truth game to be and become 'valid' academics. We recruited participants from four schools—Chemical Science, Medical Science, Nursing and Education—forming a contrast (if any) between academics from science and social science disciplines (following the university's classification) and with different pathways entering academia. To maximise participation, we only applied one recruiting requirement: all participants had

to be employed in roles requiring teaching, research and service. We did not seek to recruit participants on the basis of personal identities, such as gender. We recruited 37 participants, seven from Medical Science and ten from each of the other three schools. All participants were in tenured positions. We coded participants from Medical Sciences (M1 to M7), from Education (E1 to E10), from Nursing (N1 to N10) and from Chemical Sciences (C1 to C10) and summarised their key biographic information in Table 1.

We conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interview questions probed the participants' identity transition/formation (changes in self-perceptions), their perceptions of being academic, their views of the main characteristics and roles of academics, critical incidents along their career trajectory and their influence on perceptions of their work and the ways in which they constitute themselves as academics. Each interview lasted about one hour and was transcribed verbatim. The analysis of the interview data followed a theory-driven thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Guided by the notion of 'games of truth' (Foucault, 1997), we coded the interview data and identified themes around the participants' understanding of the academic truth game—the academic norms shaped and regulated by institutional discourses; their 'practice of self-formation of the subject' (p. 282)—the strategies they adopted to play the game to become or be an academic; and factors influencing how they play the academic truth game.

Findings I: forming the truth game

The *Standards* are an internally developed policy statement generated by the institution that has the authority to make such regulations and rules to govern its own operations. This policy has a powerful effect on academics, setting out the standards against which they are judged as valid (or winning), worthy of a permanent appointment or promotion; or as invalid (or losing), being denied a permanent position or promotion. The *Standards* have a place within a constellation of other policies and associated procedures. They reflect the external expectations of universities enshrined in New Zealand's Education and Training Act 2020, which states that 'a university is characterised by a wide diversity of teaching and research, especially at a higher level'. Other government policies related to equitable educational provision, student success and so on also have an influence (Barrow & Grant, 2019). Each of these has a direct effect on the formulation of the *Standards* and the way in which our participants might interact with them.

We analyse and interpret the policy revealing the truth game from two dimensions: the categorisation of academics and the areas of contribution with which academics are assessed.

Categorisation of academics: academic grades and disciplinary groupings

The *Standards* classify five grades of academics: Lecturer (Levels 1–7), Senior Lecturer (Levels 1–5), Senior Lecturer 'above the bar' (Levels 6–8), Associate Professor and Professor. The *Standards* describe the criteria to evaluate academics at Lecturer 1 (L1), Senior Lecturer 1 (SL1), Senior Lecturer 6 (SL6), Associate Professor (AP) and Professor when they apply for an academics position, to retain their academic position, or be promoted.

Our vertical and horizontal analysis of the *Standards* shows that the disciplinary grouping is the most significant 'consideration' (p. 3) governing the application of the *Standards*. Academic work is classified into three groupings—Natural Sciences (NS), Social Sciences

Table 1 Participants' biographic information

Gender	Female	Male
Medical	M1, M5, M7	M2, M3, M4, M6
Education	E1, E2, E4, E6, E8, E9, E10	E3, E5, E7
Nursing	N1, N2, N3, N6, N7, N8, N9, N10	N4, N5
Chemical	C4, C9, C10	C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C7, C8

Age	30–40	41–50	51–60	60+
Medical	M5, M7	M3, M6	N/A	M1, M2, M4
Education	N/A	E2	E4, E6, E7, E9	E1, E3, E5, E8, E10
Nursing	N/A	N1, N2, N3, N4	N6, N8, N10	N5, N7, N9
Chemical	C1, C8, C9	C2, C7	C3, C4, C6, C10	C5

Position	Lecture	Senior Lecturer	Associate Prof	Prof
Medical	M5	M3, M6, M7	M2	M1, M4
Education	E2	E1, E4, E7, E8, E9	E3, E6	E5, E10
Nursing	N3	N1, N2, N5, N7, N8, N9, N10	N6	N4
Chemical	C8	C1, C9	C2	C3, C4, C5, C6, C7, C10

(SS) and Humanities (H)—with each described and assessed by its own standards for promotion, continuation or appointment. Education participants are considered in Social Sciences whereas the others fall mainly into Natural Sciences according to the *Standards*.

Triple helix: the three areas of contribution

The *Standards* specify three broad areas of contribution to be considered in any evaluation. They are (1) 'Contributions to teaching, learning and supervision ("Teaching")'; (2) 'Contributions to research and/or scholarship and/or artistic activity, creative work or professional activity ("Research and Creative Work")'; and (3) 'Contributions to the University… in institutional planning, governance, leadership and operations and/or to the discipline, the profession and the community in the candidates' fields of expertise ("Service and Leadership")' (pp. 6–7).

The *Standards* provide detailed information on institutional expectations across academic grades and disciplinary groupings. The expectations for Lecturers are the same across all disciplinary areas. The other four grades, SL1, SL6, AP and Professor, have specific evaluative standards in the three areas of contribution.

Teaching

Expectations vary progressively between SL1 and SL6, AP and Professor, with a significant increase in expectations for academics crossing the SL6 to AP boundary. Generally, the criteria related to teaching apply across all disciplinary groupings, setting out expectations for increasing leadership of course/programme delivery; a strengthening emphasis on research-informed and reflexive teaching drawing on students' feedback and achievement; increasing mentorship expectations to include 'early career teachers' in addition to 'students' (AP and Professor) and additional expectation that AP and Professor gain external recognition of leadership 'in teaching and learning'; an increasing number of Honours, Masters and doctoral students supervised.

The key difference across disciplines is the expected quantum of research student supervision—more in the NS, less in SS and the least in H. By 'taking into account the supervisory opportunities in the discipline', this expectation is expressed in the form of guidance about the number of students one is expected to have supervised to completion in Honours, Master and doctoral degrees. For example, at the level of AP, academics in NS are expected to have typically 'supervised to successful completion four Honours, eight Masters and six doctoral candidates' (p. 14); whereas in SS, the number changes to four, six and five, respectively (p. 19), and in H, the number of doctoral candidates falls to four.

Research/creative work

The criteria for research/creative work are more closely specified in quantitative and qualitative terms across disciplines and through the grades. Expected numbers of publications (e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles/book chapters/creative works) and research grants are specified. For instance, the number of publications expected for SL1, SL6, AP and Professor increases from 15 to 30, to 45, to 80 in NS, from 12 to 25, to 35, to 50 in SS and from 6 to 15, to 25, to 40 in H. All academics across the grades and disciplinary groupings 'have to demonstrate quality and impact' of research outputs. Professors must demonstrate international eminence, and in NS, demonstrate 'international significance in the

field' of their research (p. 15). Expectations of grant amounts and quality increase across grades, from small to major external on to major prestigious in NS; from internal to external then to major external in SS and H. This is to say, although all disciplines evaluate the research/creative work in terms of research outputs and grants, the criteria vary in quantitative norms among the three disciplinary groupings, placing NS in the higher end, H in the lower end and SS in the middle.

Service and leadership

The standards for assessing service and leadership are required to be 'consistent with the [University's] Leadership Framework' (p. 18) designed to reflect and encourage 'a culture of distributed leadership' (p. 10). Five leadership dimensions, 'Exhibiting Personal Leadership', 'Setting Direction', 'Innovating and Engaging', 'Enabling People' and 'Achieving Results', are set out to 'help ensure excellence in teaching, research, service and administration for all staff' (p. 10). The Leadership Framework is for all staff; thus, the evaluative standards for this domain show no disciplinary differences, but expect 'increasing scope, responsibility, contact and impact' (p. 26) for academics moving from lower to higher grades.

The three areas of teaching, research/creative work, service and leadership form their own helices, within which academics, regardless of discipline, are expected to enhance their performance, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, in order to move to higher academic grades. Each of the areas interacts with the others, creating possibilities for transformation and hybridisation, such as research-informed teaching, growing leadership in course delivery and mentoring earlier career teachers and researchers. Whilst the truth games reflected in the *Standards* show no disciplinary difference in service and leadership, in teaching and research/creative work, the disciplinary differences are described mainly in quantitative terms in relation to supervision and the number of publications and research grants. The solely qualitative variation is the required levels of grants (e.g. internal, external, major external, major prestigious external).

Findings II: playing the game

A researcher game and the triple helix

Although the *Standards* do not prioritise any area in the triple helix, our analysis of interview data reveals that our participants generally give precedence to research and understand the academic truth game as a researcher game. They 'play the researcher game' (E5) to become or be 'valid' academics, since the 'institutional culture' is mainly about 'research' (C1), which is 'high-stakes' in promotion (E9, N5). For instance, N4 attributed his quick promotion to professor to the fact that he 'bring[s] in lots of money [grants]' and 'the university likes that'. In the same vein, E10 reflected that 'teaching is important… but really in the end they [university leadership] want papers and they want research funding money brought in'. Our participants recognise the need to build a robust research portfolio for career progression and sustaining their academic identity. As Morley (2016) argues, 'research is increasingly instrumentalised as a major relay of power in the construction and destruction of academic identities' (p. 28).

Although our participants interpret the academic truth game primarily as a researcher game, they also note the need to fulfil the teaching and service requirements. Here, they play the game differently. In these domains, their perceptions of academics and their practices of self-formation as subjects (Foucault, 1997) or the strategies to constitute their academic identity vary. To our surprise, even though the participants' disciplines do play a role, these differences in perceptions and strategies are mainly attributed to the participants' paths to academia, particularly their pre-academic backgrounds and experiences. Our analysis reveals two distinctive paths to academia: one begins with being practitioners (e.g. teacher, nurse, dietitian) and the other begins with being scientists.

Practitioner-to-academic

All participants from Education, Nursing and four participants from Medical Sciences (M3, M4, M5, M6) were practitioners in their respective fields (school teachers, nurses or allied health professionals) before entering academia. These practitioners perceive academic identity as research-related, and their research helps develop their knowledge of professional practice. Therefore, they play the researcher game, prioritising research whilst still seeking a balance between research, teaching and improving professional practice.

Path and perceptions

Many participants describe their path to academia as 'unplanned' and 'organic' (e.g. N1, N3, N4, E6, E8, M4, M5); their ultimate goals are to enhance professional practice and help people through embedding research findings into professional practice. For example, M5 states,

> So, for me it is very reactive nutrition up in oncology and I want to be able to prevent malnutrition and deterioration… the only way I think I am able to do that is by designing research that answers that question… The research component is what defines an academic… It [being an academic] is giving me, the dietician, the platform and skills in which I can better help the community which I see as a dietician. (M5)

This participant considers research as the defining characteristic of an academic; it extends her professional identity and practice, adding perspectives and skills. Likewise, many other participants perceive the meaning of being academics as being about 'designing and completing research', which can 'contribute to the development of clinical nursing and patient services' (N7), or 'connecting research with what happens in a [school] classroom' to 'inform teaching', to 'make a difference for children' (E10). In this manner, most participants in this group align themselves with their professional identity and identify themselves strongly as practitioners (e.g. teacher, nurse, dietitian).

Strategies: practice of self-formation

These participants' perception of academic identity and its main characteristics influence their strategies of playing the academic truth game. On the one hand, they play the researcher game, learning the skills of writing grant applications. On the other, they try to integrate professional practice into their academic lives, with research, teaching and service, striving to balance the four roles.

Grant success is a significant obstacle to enhancing research productivity. Influenced by the *Standards*, participants separate 'research' into two visible and measurable forms, 'publications' and 'grants' (e.g. E3, E7, M3, M6, N4, N7). Some find grant writing more problematic because it is 'newer' compared to teaching and publishing (N2) and 'hard to describe' (N3). Some feel 'learning about how to play the various grant obtaining games is probably the least fun part of the job' (E2). M5, a newly appointed academic, said she 'has been like channelling all [her] efforts into specific grant applications' and wishes she had access to better 'infrastructure' offering information on 'the foundations and fundamentals of writing a great grant application'.

Apart from polishing their grant writing skills, many have worked to remain connected with their former professional practice whilst fulfilling the university's teaching, research and service expectations,

> I still want to keep my clinical skills up… I want to know what is relevant for our patients so I can design research that answers that question … that is why I kept that clinical component… to get the relationships with the consultants and the team up on the ward so that they are open and inviting to ideas for research. (M5)

Most participants from Education and Nursing share this view. Some express concerns about their weakening connection with the profession after becoming academics. 'There is a real danger we are seen as disconnected from anything relevant or practical, the schools, the communities' (E7); 'One of my fears about being an academic was' 'being so engaged in research that [I] become disengaged from the clinical reality for patients' (N8). Losing connection with the profession can potentially lead to an identity crisis for academics with a professional background (Andrew et al., 2014). This phenomenon is observed in other disciplines. For example, many law professors in American universities were not in the practice of law, creating an identity crisis for them, leading to a growing chasm between practitioners and the academy (Feldman, 2004) and a perceived failure of law schools in pursuing the proper professional formation of their students—'to think like a lawyer' (Bilionis, 2018, p. 480).

Nevertheless, time is always a source of tension and it can be 'very, very difficult' (N1) for academics to commit themselves to professional practice as well as research, teaching and service. Some participants reported that they have to 'fight' (N1) and 'seek for chance' (N2) to 'maintain some kind of clinical contact' (N1) or to 'connect with the [teaching] profession and schools' (E2). As a result, our participants adopt different strategies to cope with the multiple demands. Some try to integrate two into one. As M5 joked, 'do two birds with one stone': she plans to 'develop a clinic' and 'turn that into [her] service to meet both needs'. Many other participants attempt to link their professional practice to teaching and/or research (e.g. N1, N7, N9, N10, E1, E2, M6). Some participants make different plans with alternative emphasis on professional practice or research. For instance, N2 reflected that she has 'stopped clinical work after a year and half' and is 'going to spend the next year catching up research and then will be over there [to the hospital] again because I just miss it [clinical work]'. These practices of self-formation suggest that the participants play the game differently and agentially (Foucault, 1997), engaging with the institutional norms—the rules and procedures that form the game—alongside their professional and personal beliefs and values, moulding the norms to suit their own circumstances. In this sense, they play the academic truth game of a quadruple rather than triple helix the *Standards* prescribe.

Scientist-to-academic

In contrast to the practitioner-to-academic career trajectory, all the participants from Chemical Sciences and the three remaining participants from Medical Sciences (M1, M2, M7) strongly identified themselves as scientists before entering academia. Many perceived their academic identity development as learning to balance roles that reinforce research whilst adding teaching and service roles. With extensive research experience and strong research portfolios, their principal effort relates to teaching.

Path and perception

This group of participants enter academia through what is, arguably, a more traditional and direct route, completing research training in a PhD programme and then taking a post-doctoral position(s). This pathway establishes and consolidates the participants' scientist identity. They call themselves 'scientist' (M1, C3, C4, C7, C8), 'research scientist' (M2), 'scientific researcher' (M7) and 'academic scientist' (C5, C6), placing the scientist identity at the core. As C4 emphasised, 'my core identity is scientist… If I think about what is going to be on my tombstone, it won't be university professor; it will be scientist'. In fact, many pursue an academic career for its research-friendly environment, especially the freedom to choose one's own research agenda (e.g. C1, C3, C6, C7, C9). As C3 stated, 'being an academic gives the resources, tools and support for [him] to stay at the forefront of the scientific field' (C3).

The fundamental position of the scientist identity strongly influences the participants' perception of their academic identity—in parallel with being holistic, therefore strengthening and developing their scientist identity. Being holistic indicates an inclusive relationship such that being a scientist is part of being an academic. 'To be an academic is more than to be a scientist' (C1), because 'an academic is doing a broad range of activities, including the fundamental or applied research that we [scientists] are doing' (C2). Whilst constructing an academic identity, the participants' scientist identity is strengthened and developed. Taking multiple academic roles leads to a shift in how the participants perceive themselves and what they do. For instance, C9 believes her trajectory to academia is a 'shift and expansion', because 'it [being an academic] has a broader view'—'it is more than me to conduct research, but how I facilitate, teach and work with the students to conduct research'. This identity 'expansion' was extended further by C6, who was recently promoted to full professor and described his trajectory to academia as an 'identity development',

> By being in academia, I get to multiply. It's not just my research but how I enable my students; or being an academic leader is not just the science that I can do. It is how I can enable other scientists to do theirs and their interactions with their students even more multiplying and that is the trade-off. Less time of me actually doing science myself, but more impact on others who are doing science. (C6)

Being academics and performing teaching and service roles has transformed these scientists from being self-focused to other- or student-focused, from conducting 'my' research to enabling others' research. This change signals a conscious and maybe deliberate identity transformation, 'through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way… on the basis of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment' (Foucault, 1988b, pp. 50–51).

Strategies: practice of self-formation

Extensive research experience and strong research portfolios are advantageous for the scientists playing the researcher game. However, engaging with teaching/supervising and maintaining a balance between research and teaching is also critical in meeting institutional requirements. This can be challenging because many are inexperienced in teaching, and 'nobody teaches [them] how to do that' (C5); more importantly, there are issues related to the time and the limited teaching opportunities for some specific research areas.

As with the previous group, tensions arise when the participants try to cope with multiple roles,

> I find it difficult now to dedicate enough time to science in order to develop quality work... There is too much teaching, too much administration work, too much coordination, too much service role. (C1)

The shortage of time sharpens when the usual 40% teaching and 40% research workload 'is not equilibrated in reality' (C1), nor 'equally taken for international scientific reputation and promotion in the university' (C10). The participants imply that whilst teaching is fully accounted for in workload, it is not fully recognised in the promotion process. To respond, some 'work more hours' (C1), 'work in the weekends and evenings to compensate for not having enough time on research' (C10). Others such as C2 use a different approach to manage time—'try to concentrate all teaching into very intense periods each semester', 'which means [he] can do research at other times of the year'.

Some participants have to 'reach out' (M2) and teach in areas beyond their research interest,

> I am trained as an organic chemist and have developed myself into being a medicinal chemist and there are no students in this faculty [Medical Science] who have an interest in that subject… Consequently, myself and certainly other people in the centre over time have struggled because we don't have a natural pull of students who identify with the work that we do. So, what we have done is reinvent ourselves. Now I'm teaching and I'm writing grants to PI essentially doing pharmacology… I am not an expert in that… but I'm having to diversify to engage in an academic sense. (M2)

The pronoun 'we' and the verbs 'struggle' and 'reinvent' all suggest the effort the participant and his colleagues have made to meet the teaching requirement for playing the academic truth game. They strive to find teaching opportunities because the university does not recognise the 'research stream' alone (M1) and 'there is no such thing as a research professor' here (M2). The only legitimate type of academic acknowledged by the institution is one who succeeds in the triple helix of teaching, research and service. In other words, the university applies a set of rules, the *Standards*, to produce and sustain the sole 'truth', to separate 'the true and the false' (Foucault, 1980, p. 131), to create the 'valid or invalid, winning or losing' academics (Foucault, 1997, p. 297).

Discussion: constructing 'valid' academics

Drawing on Foucault's (1980, 1997) theoretical construct of 'games of truth', this study reveals two main findings. Firstly, different factors are involved in making and playing the academic truth game. Our policy analysis suggests that disciplinary groupings and academic grades are the main factors governing the application of the *Standards*. However, our interviews show that alongside the discipline, our participants' pre-academic backgrounds or pathways into the university are the most significant in influencing their playing of the game. The most obvious example is from Medical Science where participants identify themselves as either practitioners or scientists. Our analysis reveals similarities and differences in the ways in which academics with practitioner and scientist backgrounds understand and play the academic truth game and construct their academic identity. Therefore, the second main finding of the study is that although all participants perceive becoming academics as identity development (or extension, expansion), what is developed and how it is developed differs. Academics with practitioner backgrounds emphasise their research endeavours as underpinning their developing academic identity; doing research develops their professional practice and identity. In order to play the academic truth game, they burnish their research skills, particularly research grant skills. Their desire to maintain their professional identity obliges them to retain professional connections outside academia. Thus, apart from fulfilling the triple helix requirements, they try very hard to include professional practice in their work. In contrast, academics with scientist backgrounds see academic identity as inclusive of research, teaching and service that serves to advance their scientist identity. Whilst lack of time is always the source of tension, they strive to balance three rather than four roles, among which research is still the priority, even though teaching may demand more effort, especially in those disciplines where teaching and/or supervision opportunities may be very limited.

All these findings point, to some degree, to the central questions of what is needed to construct 'valid' academics (Foucault, 1997), or in Bauman's (1996) words, 'right and proper' academics, and what an academic is or should be? Our analysis of the *Standards* and interview data reveals three kinds of 'valid' academics and their constructions, all interrelated and progressive, showing the increasing agency our participants exert in playing the academic truth game.

The first is produced by the institution, through its developing and implementing a set of rules and procedures, which forms the 'regime' at the centre of the game of truth (Foucault, 1997). The *Standards* set expectations that the institution uses to define and evaluate its academic workers through the triple helix of teaching, research and service, describing the work it requires in different disciplinary groupings and at different grades. These principles and rules form the basis of the academic truth game and have the regulatory power of institutional policy with strong performative effects (appointment, continuation or promotion—or not). Findings from the interviews show that our participants adopt a range of strategies to cope with the multiple roles. Subjected to this set of principles and rules, regardless of their discipline, all academics play the same academic truth game; performing a mix of teaching, research and service. Some participants, such as M1, M2 and their colleagues, have to keep 'developing' and 'reinventing' themselves in order to weave the helix together because their discipline does not 'have a natural pull of students' (M2). In this way, they fulfil their roles as academics and may be evaluated as valid (or invalid) by the institution (Foucault, 1997).

However, as C2 explained with his own experience of failure, contributing to the three areas may not necessarily lead to career progression (see also Barrow and Grant (2019) for the complexities and uncertainties of academic promotion). Therefore, many participants read beyond the *Standards*, interpreting and refining the academic truth game as a researcher game prioritising research, perceiving it as having higher stakes in an institution with a culture of pursuing research excellence and international rankings (Stratford, 2019). Academics refine the academic truth game by internalising both explicit and implicit institutional norms and regulations. Therefore, a second 'valid' academic is one who advances their academic career by increasing research outputs whilst also fulfilling teaching and service requirements. Some participants, especially those with practitioner backgrounds, theorise their academic identity even further, constructing the third type of 'valid' academic. This type integrates professional practice into their academic work, alongside the demands of teaching, research and service, to become the academics they aspire to be, even when this means coping with additional roles and responsibilities that the university seems not to recognise (Barrow & Xu, 2021).

The variety of conceptualisations and constructions of academic identity indicate that our participants are 'playing the same game differently' (Foucault, 1997, p. 295). They do make themselves academic subjects in the institutional sense, complying with the rules of the academic truth game, but also with a sense of agential self-constitution, through acting on those rules differently to achieve, to some extent, an 'arts of existence' and become the academics they aspire to be (Foucault, 1985). These practices of self-formation, or the ways in which our participants play the academic truth game, demonstrate active identity construction mediated by forces from disciplinary, institutional, professional and personal spheres. So, although the *Standards* (and associated rules) set up a particular set of power relations, individual academics interact with those rules in different ways enacting a range of reasonable options for themselves, to escape 'from a domination of truth' (Foucault, 1997, p. 295) and 'to discover something different and to more or less modify this or that rule' (p. 297). Some of these interactions (or types of play) are influenced by the discipline in which they work (e.g. limited opportunities of teaching), their pathways into academia or their personal aspirations (e.g. helping the community). However, when playing the academic truth game, our participants make an ontological shift from being professionals and scientists towards an ongoing formation as academics.

Conclusion: facilitating the construction of different types of academics

Whilst this study draws on a small selection of disciplines in one New Zealand university, limiting its generalisability, its comparative approach reveals interesting contrasts and its findings contribute to the field in several ways. Firstly, by applying Foucault's (1997) concept of 'games of truth', the study illustrates the interactions between the institution and its academic workers—the policy that forms and regulates the academic truth game, and policy interpretation and implementation that is associated with academics playing the game. Secondly, by adopting a comparative perspective, this study broadens our conceptualisation of academics and their roles, showing the various understandings and strategies of academic identity formation within and across different disciplinary groupings. Such findings reveal that the participants' pathways into academia play a significant role as they make an ontological shift from professionals or scientists towards an academic identity. In

this ongoing process of identity formation, our participants encountered varying challenges arising from their disciplines and pre-academic backgrounds. Different groups of academics adopt diverse strategies to play the academic truth game differently, not only taking heed of the institution's triple helix requirements but also of their career and personal aspirations. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that despite speculation about the weakening of the normative power of disciplines (Trowler, 2019), the university provides a more facilitative environment for some disciplines than others. As higher education institutions extend their disciplinary reach, policies that act in ways that define and evaluate academics need to evolve to support the range of academics who find a home in the university, for example, finding ways to value academics not only on the basis of their disciplinary groupings but also on their pre-academic backgrounds and maybe their career and personal aspirations.

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the vexed question of academic identity and its formation. It problematises and challenges standardised definition and evaluation of academics and offers contextualised, multiple, dynamic and agential understandings of being and becoming academics, which may help build a vital, nourishing and ethical academic polity (Barrow et al., 2020). Future studies involving participants from more disciplines and institutions in different jurisdictions and research into individual academic's perceptions of success and failure along with the interplay of gender, career track, discipline and institution may offer valuable insights into academic identity construction in the changing higher education landscape.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Acker, S., & Wagner, A. (2019). Feminist scholars working around the neoliberal university. *Gender and Education, 31*(1), 62–81.

Andrew, N., Lopes, A., Pereira, F., & Lima, I. (2014). Building communities in higher education: the case of nursing. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(1), 72–77.

Barrow, M., Grant, B., & Xu, L. (2020). Academic identities research: Mapping the field's theoretical frameworks. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1849036

Barrow, M., & Grant, B. (2019). The uneasy place of equity in higher education: Tracing its (in) significance in academic promotions. *Higher Education, 78*, 133–147.

Barrow, M., & Xu, L. (2021). Constituting ethical academics in teacher education: Navigating multiple and conflicting discourses. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 109*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103572

Bauman, Z. (1996). From pilgrim to tourist: Or a short history of identity. In S. Hall & P. Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 18–36). Sage.

Bilionis, L. D. (2018). Bringing purposefulness to the American law school's support of professional identity formation. *U. St. Thomas Law Journal, 14*, 480–497.

Boughey, C., & McKenna, S. (2021). *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*. African Minds.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328–352.

Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal, 34*(3), 329–345.

Feldman, S. M. (2004). The transformation of an academic discipline: Law professors in the past and future (or Toy Story too). *Journal of Legal Education, 54*(4), 471–498.

Fitzgerald, T. (2020). Mapping the terrain of leadership: Gender and leadership in higher education. *Irish Educational Studies, 39*(2), 221–232.

Foucault, M. (1988a). Technologies of the self. In L. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). University of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (1988b). An aesthetics of existence. In L. D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Michel Foucault politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writing 1977–1984* (pp. 47–53). Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. C. Gordon (Ed.). Harvester.

Foucault, M. (1985). *The history of sexuality volume 2: The use of pleasure*. Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (1997). *Michel Foucault: Ethics, subjectivity and truth. The essential works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol 1, P. Rabinow (Ed.). The New Press.

Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*(1), 99–125.

Green, W. (2019). Engaging "students as partners" in global learning: Some possibilities and provocations. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 23*(1), 10–29.

Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education, 49*(1–2), 155–176.

Mertkan, S., & Bayrakli, H. (2018). Re-inventing researcher identity: When the individual interacts with the contextual power dynamics. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(2), 316–327.

Morley, L. (2016). Troubling intra-actions: Gender, neo-liberalism and research in the global academy. *Journal of Education Policy, 31*(1), 28–45.

Page, D. (2020). The academic as consumed and consumer. *Journal of Education Policy, 35*(5), 585–601.

Peters, M. A. (2004). Educational research: 'Games of truth' and the ethics of subjectivity. *The Journal of Educational Enquiry, 5*(2), 50–63.

Pick, D., Symons, C., & Teo, S. T. T. (2017). Chronotopes and timespace contexts: Academic identity work revealed in narrative fiction. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(7), 1174–1193.

Stratford, R. J. (2019). *Higher education and the Anthropocene-Towards an ecological approach to higher education policy in New Zealand* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Waikato].

Trowler, P. (2019). *Accomplishing change in teaching and learning regimes: Higher education and the practice sensibility*. Oxford University Press.

Tülübaş, T., & Göktürk, Ş. (2020). Neoliberal governmentality and performativity culture in higher education: Reflections on academic identity. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 5*(1), 198–232.

Winter, R. (2009). Academic manager or managed academic? Academic identity schisms in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 31*(2), 121–131.

Xu, L. (2023). Moving between fantasies, fallacies and realities: Students' perceptions of supervisors' roles in doctoral publishing. *Teaching in Higher Education, 28*(3), 565–579.