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Celebrating and commiserating misfitting in academia

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Academic misfits: questioned belongings in higher education offers a compelling anthology that delves into the nuanced experiences of individuals who feel like outsiders within the academic world. The book's introduction sets the stage by highlighting the editors' emotional response and sense of kinship upon reading the submitted chapters. It emphasises the pervasive issue of imposterism and the rigid and hierarchical norms that often stifle true academic freedom. Through a collection of diverse stories, the book challenges the conventional image of academia and celebrates the beauty of deviating from the norm. Although the book does not include accounts from learning developers, it addresses experiences relevant to them – given their often complex and misunderstood role at the margins of academia (Stapleford, 2019). The book calls for a deeper understanding of not fitting in and advocates for genuine inclusivity and diversity within academic institutions.

A notable theme identified early in the text is the self-awareness demonstrated by the editorial team. As they note in their introduction, 'the academic discipline disciplines us' (p.3). Even without an intent to discipline, the process of editing the collection led to them disciplining their contributors, both through guidelines for submissions and through the exclusion of contributions where anonymity could not be guaranteed. The editors also explained their choice of metaphor-rich categories of contributions, acknowledging that 'oversimplified categorisations … hinder us from seeing maybe more elusive patterns in

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what is conveyed than we as editors can work out' (p.6). This editorial awareness is particularly important in this collection, given contributors already feel they are on the margins of academia. Such careful consideration and curation are likely to enhance their sense of belonging to this community of misfits.

The book is split into four sections that focus on aspects of misfitting in academia. In section one, 'Playing a different flute', Mariejoy San Buenaventura draws on her 'blue collar entertainer background' (p.16) and how this influences her self-identity. In the next chapter, Luna Muñoz writes about their mistaken enthusiasm for the value and credibility of academic qualifications over lived experience. In chapter three, this section closes with the anthology's only anonymous contribution that challenges typical academic writing norms through a rollercoaster of poetic dialogue. It explores how the environment that we grow up in impacts our self-identity and the way we view the world, aligning with the work of popular researchers of working-class academics (e.g., Binns, 2019; Crew, 2020; 2024).

Section two, 'Living by other standards', starts with Binod Basnet's chapter exploring how institutions need to enable educators to personalise learning for students with mild physical or learning disabilities, as these learners are often ignored or invisible in the classroom. The section's next contribution is from Anna Uhlin, who discusses being in love with the idea of being an academic, but how she found that her 'capital did not fit the neatly organised rows and columns that [she] perceived as necessary to mark "check" when *being an academic*' (p.62). Moving from their academic training, she posits that academics should talk more about 'the ongoing endeavour' of 'becoming an academic' (p.65). The contribution from Magnus Hoppe, the editorial lead, concludes the book's second section. Hoppe offers a reflection on how difficult he finds it to remember names and facts, something which he suggests makes him a 'terrible academic' (p.68), but which he reframes as an interest in the ideas, constructions, and phenomena that underpin his discipline.

Section three, 'Adhering to a heart', begins with a collaborative autoethnography from Robin Shortland-Jones, David Hodgson, Britta Biedermann, Lynelle Watts, and Angela Barns reflecting on the development of the neoliberal academy in Australia. Collectively, they examine the heterogeneity of misfitting. They playfully use recognisable clichés in their section subheadings – such as 'Taking off my rose-coloured glasses' and 'A square

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peg in a round hole' – to examine the different ways they each resist the conformity and acceleration of academic pursuits. In Chapter 8, Chris Smith charts his journey from being a business undergraduate student to teaching and researching in a business school. The first line, 'Oh I'm in the faculty of business but …' (p.90) resonated with me as a philosopher turned administrator turned business lecturer, who does not always feel a sense of fit in my faculty. In this section's closing chapter, Alexandra Bristow, Sarah Robinson, and Olivier Ratle offer individual vignettes of their journeys to 'becoming academics' and 'lives of misfitting', before sharing a transcript of their conversation about 'misfitting together' to challenge 'a sense of malaise, of maladjustment, or even trauma' (p.109), evoking Bateson's (1972) concept of the metalogue. They use a format reminiscent of the one used by Coghlan et al. (2025), where the authors exchanged individual reflective accounts on their experiences of collaboration, before meeting to discuss these accounts to generate themes from their reflections and discussions.

In the final section, 'Cherishing a whole life', Iva Josefsson's chapter repositions the female pregnant body in academia as a counterpoint to the 'hegemonic masculine structural ordering of academia' (p.117). Her approach is reminiscent of Wren Butler's (2021, p.16) description of the 'hegemonic academic'. Josefsson emphasises the need for greater inclusivity for this marginalised group. In Chapter 11, Henry Stopfel reflects on his decision to leave academia, citing the lack of permanent employment opportunities that did not require frequent relocation – something he was unable to do without leaving his young son behind. The section concludes with Cally Guerin's piece outlining her portfolio career that comprises of multiple casual contracts. She had initially committed to the meritocratic ideal that hard work pays off, before realising that such a belief was a 'cruel optimism' that 'is damaging because it stands in the way of successfully flourishing in life' (p.133). She reflects on how her career choices have influenced the advice she gives to current PhD students in her role as a researcher developer.

The collection concludes with a powerful reflection on the multifaceted nature of misfitting within academia. The final chapter underscores that being an academic misfit is not inherently negative; rather, it can be a potent stance against the rigid structures and norms that often dominate academic institutions. The editors acknowledge the limitations of their anthology, noting that many critical stories remain untold due to the potential risks involved

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in sharing them. The stories included, however, serve as vital reference points for further reflection and discussion on how to achieve deeper diversity and inclusivity in academia.

This book works well to highlight the personal and circumstantial nature of misfitting, emphasising that it is a deeply individual experience shaped by one's aspirations, circumstances, and the constraints of the academic environment. It calls for a reimagining of academia as a space that values human divergence, vulnerability, and moral integrity, something which is likely to be celebrated by readers who find themselves occupying the broader third space of higher education. By sharing diverse narratives, the anthology encourages readers to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more inclusive and humane academic landscape. Ultimately, *Academic misfits* inspires hope that through collective reflection and action, academia can evolve to better support all its members, especially those who dare to deviate from the norm.

Acknowledgements

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