

# **"Who am I? Navigating Professional Identity as an Ethnic Minority Early Career Academic**

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## **Abstract**

This reflection article aims to share a personal account of a doctoral researcher transitioning to an independent professional. Key aspects, such as their experience constructing their identity in their field, the professional developmental support as a doctoral researcher in preparation and during that transition, and the challenges with employment opportunities for the wider doctoral graduate community will be discussed. In addition to drawing on previous literature, provocative questions will be shared with the higher education sector to consider what more we can do to support the lives of postgraduate researchers after their doctorate to provide their sense of belonging.

Championing that early career professionals need to have the graduates' attributes to make it in the "real world" is one thing. But the support to meet individual needs is another. Having the right skills and experiences is difficult and valuable. Yet, do we know if our graduates are fully ready to become independent professionals in the real world?

## **Introduction**

*"Becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end." (Michelle Obama)*

Finding the answer to my academic identity and a sense of belonging is something I constantly questioned when I completed my undergraduate degree. However, I only recognised its prominence when I started my doctorate. It has been a question lingering in my mind with no clear answer where one will go after a few years of completing a PhD or from what I call a "safe bubble". Yet, undoubtedly, the challenges I experienced demonstrated that constructing my identity in my discipline and the wider sector was more challenging than one would have thought. Or rather, the feeling of being unprepared with no protocol to follow. Therefore, Michelle Obama's above quote captures the essence of this personal reflection.

## **Motivation for this paper**

The autoethnography publication by Wong in 2022 deeply resonated with me. In this heartfelt piece, Wong wholeheartedly shared their experience in Higher Education (HE) as an ethnic minority individual. It made my experience incredibly authentic and personal, perfectly capturing the challenges of finding your place in a new environment when trying to fit into a "space". But what I admire the most is the profound

transparency and openness demonstrated by the author, who dared to share such a deeply personal experience in a widely accessible publication. By doing so, they have provided readers with valuable insights into their extensive lived experiences accumulated over the years. While I am inspired by this autoethnography, I know that my courage to share something as personal as they did is so far-fetched. Nevertheless, this article aims to share a personal account of my journey as I transition into an independent professional, focusing on my challenges and experience in constructing my educational identity.

Navigating an unfamiliar environment, where one feels like an outsider, presents numerous challenges (Ahn and Davis, 2020). Contemplating the appropriate actions and responses to these challenges can be quite daunting. As I reflect upon my whole education journey, I finally comprehend why certain events unfolded – perhaps with life experience and age come better wisdom. The external aspects of my identity, defined by my appearance, are immutable. Growing up in an environment where no one else looked like me meant I always experienced challenges of "blending in". Thus, there were instances when I wished I could effortlessly adopt the appearance of others. Yet, as I spent more time with my peers, especially in classrooms, I gradually assimilated into the British culture and was accepted for being who I was. Perhaps I was being accepted as I was there and was not going anywhere! Rarely I ponder upon my sense of self-assurance, having seemingly "mastered" the art of blending in with my surroundings. However, on multiple occasions, my ability to blend in faltered. In those instances, I and those around me suddenly realised that my firm grasp on my identity and sense of belonging had slipped through my fingers. As a result, it triggers a fight or flight response as I frantically try to pinpoint what went wrong and how I can quickly restore a sense of equilibrium before being exposed as an imposter.

Being in education, like everyone, we all partake in the same curriculum within the confines of a shared space. However, upholding that trajectory, like everyone else, demands relentless effort – especially when your sense of belonging is repeatedly shattered year after year, compelling you to start "mastering the art of blending in" while retaining your true identity. This endeavour takes a toll on your mental and physical wellbeing. I would be lying if I said that keeping the same momentum is easy while simultaneously striving to grow and progress alongside your peers. In hindsight, I realise I often grapple with imposter syndrome, struggling to grasp my identity within this educational sphere.

The prominence of my sense of belonging intensified as I found myself amidst a diverse population with varied backgrounds. It was a weird transition when I naively believed that being surrounded by individuals who resembled me would offer a greater sense of comfort and acceptance. Yet I was wrong and felt more adrift than ever before. I subconsciously assumed I knew who I was then, only to realise that my identity within that space remained elusive. I often found myself caught between two groups. On the one hand, I adapted to the culture by nurturing and professionally shaping my behaviour and responses accordingly. Conversely, the identity I had previously clung to seemed to vanish slowly, and (re)integrating myself into this group became more challenging than ever. In those moments, my identity became blurry. I struggled to understand why I faced rejection from one group despite sharing the same ethnicity and outward appearance. Perhaps it was an unconscious manifestation of cultural bias, which unknowingly influenced my growth and engagement as a student. Thus, I held on to the hope that participating in various student activities would lead me to rediscover my sense of belonging.

Previous literature ascertained the association between student engagement and the importance of classroom context to foster a positive and culturally inclusive classroom environment (Reinke *et al.*, 2022). Galindo *et al.* (2022) discussed how student engagement could be affected by the macro (social) and micro (school/ workplace environment) level conditions, shaping the individual's experiences and addressing the inequality factors that could be malleable to improve learning outcomes. Considering this, student engagement can also foster a sense of belonging, which could explain the activities I found myself engrossed in as a method of escape. For example, Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) positioned how pedagogical partnerships contribute to students' academic development, creating space for growth and exploration with opportunities for meaningful understanding of the learning environment. Likewise, Gillien-O'Neel (2019) highlights how a sense of belonging operates at both personal and daily levels, impacting students' academic successes and engagement in their education journey, encompassing emotional and behavioural components towards their academic performance. Thus, it is apparent that understanding my sense of belonging is a complex topic, not just my educational experience but of the educational environment and the wider society.

My academic identity has been an ongoing struggle. The passing of time meant I learned to navigate situations to minimise the risks of reliving a particular experience, which, unfortunately, felt like it has scarred me for life, or rather, that embarrassment of suddenly feeling lost and unsure of my own identity. That moment made everything and everyone around me suddenly feel distant and unfamiliar. Upon reflection, I now understand why I was treated differently, as every step leading up to that point had been positive. While I will never forget that experience, it motivated me to explore other interests outside of my main discipline, shielding myself from similar future situations. Fast forward to the present day, and questioning my academic identity remains a constant and challenging cycle. The experiences during my postgraduate education and the transition into becoming a somewhat competent professional align with the ongoing discussions on equality, diversity, and inclusion (Thomas and Quinlan, 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2023). These challenges go beyond my superficial appearances but also delve into the societal factors contributing to our struggles.

### **The statistics don't lie.**

It has been known that Early Career Researchers (ECRs) struggle throughout their career from PhD onwards to be successful in academia (Browning *et al.*, 2016; Fransman, 2014; Macaulay, 2023; Stanley, 2022). Statistics from the Higher Education Policy Institute (2020) found that 67% of PhD students want a career in academic research, yet only 30% stay in academia after three years. Furthermore, 33-70% of those who started their PhD never finished (Jones, 2013), and one-third of those enrolled intend to drop out (Castelló *et al.*, 2017).

Completing a PhD is undoubtedly challenging, but for individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds, the journey becomes even more arduous. Research has shown a widening participation gap between ethnic minority students and their White British counterparts within HE, where those from ethnic minority backgrounds have academic challenges of stories of persistent, entrenched, and pervasive inequalities impacting various career levels within the sector (Arday, 2020; Cramer, 2021; Macaulay, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the proportion of ethnic minority graduates progressing to higher levels of study, such as PhD, remains lower than their white peers.

For example, 2021/2022 figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that ethnic minorities accounted for only 17.34% of postgraduate research qualifications, such as PhDs, and 21.7% of postgraduate taught masters (HESA, 2023b). Furthermore, those who complete the doctoral journey compete for a limited number of academic positions, as the PhD holders surpass the availability of such roles. HESA's 2021/22 (HESA, 2023a) figures highlight that 43% of academic staff were employed on contracts involving teaching and research responsibilities, while 35% of academics were on teaching contracts only. Amongst those academics, 33% held fixed-term contracts, with 20% of those from ethnic minority backgrounds. These statistics highlight not only the challenges of securing academic positions within HE but also the difficulties faced by ethnic minority graduates in finding job security and long-term stability in academia.

The statistics from HESA and other literature are shocking and unsurprising for colleagues. But as one of the minority individuals in this academic space, it can contribute to a sense of unease and reflection on one's own experiences. I never reflected on myself within this HE space until recent years, questioning whether my many failures (more so than my achievements) have been directly or indirectly impacted by my outward appearance or my efforts to overcome difficult challenges.

Surpassing the doctoral journey and becoming an academic is a significant accomplishment. Yet surviving this new journey is another matter when the ongoing struggle to navigate and thrive in this role can be daunting. It is that constant need to prove myself and "blend in" where possible, perpetually going through the same redemption cycle. I would be lying if this transitioning journey had been easy; otherwise, everybody is doing it. But rather, it has been a challenging yet thought-provoking journey that necessitates regular self-reflection. I often contemplate the question "Who am I?" in the context of my own academic identity within my discipline, the HE community, and the wider society.

### **Was my doctoral training enough?**

Embarking on my doctoral journey marked one of the significant academic milestones. Institutional doctoral programmes are designed to facilitate the individual's research endeavours and provide opportunities to acquire external knowledge and skills relevant to their research topic. Previous research has highlighted the impact of doctoral education on individuals, manifesting the transformation to look beyond the academic professions after the doctorate (Herbert *et al.*, 2020; Cardoso *et al.*, 2022; Hnatkova *et al.*, 2022). Typically spanning 4 to 6 years, depending on the country and enrolment status, doctoral programmes offer doctoral researchers opportunities to engage with their research and participate in scholarly activities to enhance their professional development. A previous study has ascertained the "multidimensional" nature of a doctorate, emphasising its role in the independent, "creative, critical autonomous and responsibility skills" that a PhD provides (Hnatkova *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it provides authentic learning experiences, such as disciplinary-related teaching, which can be valuable for those interested in pursuing an academic career.

Conversely, there is evidence that certain gaps in doctoral training may hinder candidates' preparedness for diverse career paths. For example, Hnatkova *et al.* (2022) identified barriers to intersectoral mobility and interdisciplinary research, which can impact success and future opportunities, as doctoral research heavily relies on the guidance and mentorship provided by supervisors. Nevertheless, doctoral researchers can progress successfully beyond their PhD with proper guidance and opportunities. Therefore, careful consideration is necessary to ensure that doctoral programmes are tailored to individual's needs, providing opportunities to develop transferable skills and acquire the necessary tools for their future careers.

For me, a few years of my PhD turned into a process where I embraced the opportunities that came with the doctoral training, echoing Michelle Obama's quote at the start of this paper. I knew my PhD would lay th

e essential groundwork for my journey. However, having faced and overcome various challenges throughout my educational journey, I was determined not to relive those circumstances. Throughout my PhD, I continued to reflect on myself and contemplate "what's next after my PhD". For example, previous literature emphasises the importance of developing graduates through doctoral programmes, equipping them with the necessary skills, attributes, and competencies to enter the workforce (Mantai *et al.*, 2022, 2023). Further, acknowledging the need to adapt to evolving professional landscapes post-education. What particularly resonates with me is the increasing trend in doctoral programmes towards fostering a broader range of competencies, exposing graduates to multiple employment sectors, enhancing their awareness and skills and expanding their employability prospects. Overall, my doctoral training provided me with the tools to survive my PhD and addressed areas that graduates need to feel "job ready". Therefore, this emphasised the practical applications of knowledge and skills, allowing positive impacts within my field of study and the wider society.

### **"Am I an Imposter?"**

I am an academic, but I don't feel like an academic. Many students and recent graduates often find themselves grappling with concerns such as the financial and job stability they can expect after completing their degrees, compounded by the burden of student debt (De Gayardon *et al.*, 2019; Nissen *et al.*, 2019; Velez *et al.*, 2019). Without a doubt, I have questioned this many times – particularly towards the end of each academic year, when a sense of nervousness and uncertainty sets in about what lies ahead after my degree, with "no more further courses after a PhD". Such challenges have often contributed to poor mental health and wellbeing, adding an extra burden, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (de Gayardon *et al.*, 2019). Graduating from university is an achievement for anyone; however, the true challenge lies in successfully translating the knowledge and skills acquired into stable employment in the real world. Job hunting can be arduous, especially when competition among new graduates is fierce due to abundant graduates and limited academic job openings (Larson *et al.*, 2014).

As we navigate our career paths, we often uncover our interests and strive to align our work with our expectations and those of others (Quinlan and Corbin, 2023). Perhaps this is to help manage the imposter syndrome. But further, this also provides the

opportunity to engage with the community, communicate our work through various channels, and explore our academic identity alongside other interests. Quinlan and Corbin (2023) examined how students' career interests develop during HE and identified factors influencing those changes. Amongst the extensive list, evidence suggests that work-integrated learning, placements, assessments, employment (Dalyruple *et al.*, 2021), support of inspirational teachers (Quinlan, 2019), and friends and family support influence the changes in career interests. Undoubtedly, a career in academia is multifaceted, complex, and wriggly.

Understanding my academic identity through my doctoral journey and transitioning to an independent professional is messy. The transition into academia has remained somewhat elusive, leaving me uncertain and bewildered. Despite outwardly, I have somewhat mastered the art of a sense of calmness. Still, internally, I continue to grapple with a flurry of doubts and bump against the constant tides of obstacles beyond me. Imposter syndrome, characterised by self-doubt and a sense of being a fraud among accomplished peers, has been widely recognised across various disciplines, occupations, and career levels (Abdelaal, 2020; Morris *et al.*, 2022). Yet, my unexpected transition overnight further intensified the questioning of my abilities and raised the fundamental question of "Who am I?" and how I fit into the well-established community within the institution. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that one's academic identity is shaped not only by imposter syndrome but also by a complex interplay of social, cultural, experiential, and personal values (van Rooij *et al.*, 2021).

The doctoral journey has been a fulfilling experience, particularly the research I have undertaken. However, I found myself engaging in "everything else" to escape the clutches of imposter syndrome and discover my authentic self. When I began my undergraduate degree, the thought of going on a PhD journey and academic career seemed unimaginable. Yet, here I am, having progressed through years of education and emerging on the other side (in one piece), trying to "forge" my academic identity. Perhaps my inclination to embrace the diverse opportunities and explore interests beyond my primary discipline has kept and/or helped me remain engaged (and kept the temptation of PhD procrastination at bay). Nonetheless, as the statistics indicated, navigating academia is a formidable challenge, especially when haunted by the persistent presence of imposter syndrome lurking at every turn.

Continuous preparedness and equipping oneself with the necessary knowledge and skills is an ongoing endeavour. The gradual understanding of the processes and expectations, both from within and from others, becomes increasingly apparent as one progresses through the academic world. I see my doctoral journey as a sponge, trying to absorb as much knowledge as possible and develop the necessary skills to become a competent and independent professional. However, the challenge lies in bridging the gap between this academic immersion and the practical applications in real-world scenarios. At times, it feels like the practical application is elusive and unattainable. Therefore, embodying the aspiring characteristics of those who have inspired and influenced me in my academic journey is difficult. As such, performing professional duties sometimes feels more like a chore, as one strives to evade the imposter syndrome and yearns for deeper enjoyment and fulfilment in work. Being part of HE entails being a perpetually learning professional, constantly seeking the latest innovative knowledge and honing relevant skills. Yet, the distinction between being an academic in theory and "feeling" like an academic can often seem like two different sides of a coin, with a perceived disconnection between the ideal and reality.

Entering academia as my chosen career has been a strange feeling. There was no definitive moment when I consciously flipped a switch to "become an academic". It has been a gradual experience. However, a lingering uncertainty about the path forward persists within me. I grapple with the fear of navigating this domain while dreading that others, especially my discerning students, who can be the harshest critics, may perceive my inadequacies. It also seems like the "protective bubble" I used to inhabit has burst, propelling me into the unknown during this transition. This has created an undeniably daunting feeling and often necessitates learning as I go without a clear-cut recipe for survival. I constantly find myself anxiously glancing over my shoulder, carefully examining each decision, and avoiding the rabbit holes that may lie ahead. However, amidst the uncertainties, I realised that constant self-motivation, self-reassurance, self-reminder, and acknowledging my small wins contribute to my motivation and shape who I am today. Additionally, I recognise the importance of acknowledging that, despite the feelings of isolation, I must take proactive steps to recognise my strengths and weaknesses and leverage available resources. Therefore, engaging with my surroundings to try and confront my imposter syndrome will hopefully help me forge a unique scholarly identity, reminding me of why I first signed up for this career.

### **So, is my PhD valuable? Importantly, what would I tell my younger self?**

My perception of the value of having a PhD has changed while completing a doctorate. Previous literature has explored the value of a PhD in employability in both traditional and non-traditional careers. While it is widely recognised that a PhD is essential (though this might differ at times) for an academic career, my initial thought of dedicating several years to delve deeply into a narrow research area seemed daunting, leaving me uncertain about sustaining motivation throughout the process. However, for me, the true value of my doctorate lies in acquiring knowledge and the opportunities it provides for self-discovery, introspection, and personal growth. Undoubtedly, committing to an extended research period is a weighty decision, accompanied by the realisation that unforeseen consequences (such as the COVID-19 pandemic!) may arise. Nonetheless, my doctoral journey has proved to be a transformative experience, shaping my professional values, broadening my research interests, and enabling me to identify how and where I can contribute to my career.

My doctorate has been a valuable journey. However, embarking on this path with a clear understanding of why you truly *need* a PhD is far more fetching than merely pursuing it out of curiosity (really, you need to think about it). The years spent immersed in a PhD programme can be all-consuming, with work-life balance becoming a distant memory. Gradually, you find yourself isolated within a bubble, where only those within your immediate research group comprehend the extent of your work and become your own cheerleader. Moreover, the demands of a PhD drain your physical and mental wellbeing, particularly if you miscalculate the time and energy required to complete tasks. Therefore, it is important to prioritise and recognise the significance of maintaining good health and wellbeing throughout the journey, as they contribute to your overall success. My doctoral journey has taken me to unexpected areas, expanding my horizons and pushing me to consider new areas I never envisioned exploring. It has been a process of overcoming feelings of marginalisation and isolation, seeing out a community or "clan" where I can find a sense of belonging and

support. This journey has offered opportunities to identify how and where I fit into the broader academic landscape, helping me better understand my identity and purpose.

But what about my perception on whether I consider my transition from being a student to an early career academic a success? That, I cannot say for certain. While it is crucial to promote the development of essential skills for early career professionals in the "real world," we must also address the distinct requirements of doctoral researchers. I know I possess the foundational skills, yet I often feel like I am donning a mask, constantly navigating the complexities of identity as I grapple with the notion of "becoming" a scholar. This challenge is further compounded by external factors such as the environment and societal issues, which contribute to a sense of foreignness and amplify imposter syndrome. Amidst this, I recognise the need to continually push myself and evolve my identity as I navigate the ever-changing landscape of higher education. While academia has undoubtedly shaped me, I have realised that understanding my identity is an ongoing and arduous journey—a marathon rather than a sprint. It is a process that requires self-reflection, perseverance, and an unwavering commitment to defining myself among others in this dynamic and evolving space.

To my younger self. Identity is not fixed. But it is a fluid concept. You will constantly face unexpected challenges and unwritten rules, and you will question, "why me?". You cannot change who you are. But, embrace those experiences and embark on a journey with your aspiration, contributing to the wider academic landscape while embracing the learnings of social customs. It is about challenging your sense of belonging, experiencing unexpected experiences, and cultivating yourself into someone who will fundamentally find your identity and sense of belonging on the other side. Is ok to be who you are. You are not an imposter. Trust that this journey of self-discovery will lead you to a place where you will appreciate who you are.

To the readers who have journeyed through this whole article. Without a doubt, I have shared with you a lived experience of the challenges I have faced subconsciously. This is a reflection of myself and my own experience that does not represent others. Would I have done things differently? I do not think so; otherwise, I would not have experienced and realised what I have gone through. However, it highlights the need to support the ever-changing society to help create an environment where we uplift and empower one another, enabling individuals to find unique identities within this space. We invest years in the development of individuals through their PhDs, but we must also consider the indirect factors that influence their success, particularly for ethnic minority students. Statistics reveal this population's challenges, but we must continue to address issues of inclusivity and diversity with pedagogical practices that support their educational journey. Further, it is also to encourage and support doctoral researchers and early career academics beyond mere publication counts and grant achievements. Instead, developing a culture of compassion and recognising individuals' values and contributions. Imposter syndrome may always linger. Yet, by shifting our perspectives and valuing each other, we can create a support community, allowing impactful contributions.

Michelle Obama stated that "becoming" is not a destination but a continuous journey of growth and evolution. This sentiment resonates deeply with the transition into an early academic career, as each path is distinct and ever-changing. As I have experienced, fostering an environment that prioritises empathy and compassion in all aspects of our work and decision-making processes is crucial as we navigate higher



education. By embracing these values, we can create a supportive space where individuals can thrive and continue their personal and professional development.

And so, who are you, and do you know your academic identity?

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