



Let's form a positive academia collective transformation: Re-imagining our academic values and interactions

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Abstract

As Management academics, we could play a critical role in tackling the existential threats that our societies are facing by using our expertise in organizing resources and people to get things done. Instead, we seem to be stuck in an endless cycle of self-critique on the state of our academic discipline. In this provocation essay, we disrupt this vicious cycle by laying the foundation for an academic heterotopia through a concrete, comprehensive, and coherent re-imagination of both our academic values and our interactions. Discarding the convenient falsehood that as academics we are merely unwilling victims of neoliberalism and all-powerful managers, we instead embrace the inconvenient truth that we have co-created the current state of academia. We therefore urge all of us to take back freedom and invest our individual and collective efforts into crafting a more positive academia by joining our PACT (Positive Academia Collective Transformation).

Keywords

Academic interactions, academic values, action, care, collegiality, dialogue, heterotopia, holistic careers, impact, research process, research quality, transformation, voice

Why do we need Positive Academia?

As management academics, we could play a crucial role in supporting humanity to address our manifold environmental, social, economic, and technological problems. Our *raison d'être*—“*how to organize people and resources to get things done*”—is fundamental to tackling *all* societal grand challenges (Davis et al., 2022: 85; Seno-Alday, 2021). Instead, we seem to be stuck in an endless cycle of critique, focusing not only on the challenges in dealing with an increasingly neoliberal

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academia (Jones, 2025), but also involving an abundance of self-critique on the state of management academia, a “wash, rinse, repeat cycle of introspection” (Schwarz, 2020: 231) that “has had no discernible direct effect” (Hibbert, 2025: 112). Our research is said to privilege theory and rigor over relevance, making it impenetrable to the wider public and irrelevant to practicing managers (Lindebaum and Hibbert, 2024). Academic misconduct (Honig et al., 2018) and questionable research practices (QRPs) (Butler et al., 2017) are on the rise, resulting in a research credibility crisis (Byington and Felps, 2017). Our academic cultures are characterized by fierce competition and a normalization, or even glorification, of long working hours (Harley, 2019). Metricized research performance is the key driver of our career progression, leaving teaching, service and leadership, and external engagement seriously undervalued (Anderson et al., 2021). And so, the long list of our critique goes on, culminating in books such as “Shut down the Business School” (Parker, 2018), “Management Studies in Crisis” (Tourish, 2019), and “Dark Academia, How Universities Die” (Fleming, 2021).

In this provocation essay, we argue that these trenchant critiques of current-day academia suffer from three crucial drawbacks that limit their ability to initiate positive change. First, they typically focus on the *symptoms* of “dark academia” rather than diagnosing the underlying illness. They thus aim to resolve isolated problems such as fraud, bullying, lack of research relevance, and poor writing, without considering how these are embedded in our self-reinforcing system of academic values and interactions. In this provocation, we argue that these symptoms are the direct result of our currently dominant values that prioritize publication quantity over quality, privilege the research *destination* over the *journey* (the research process), favor research over any other academic role, and are fixated on our individual academic achievements rather than our positive impact on our stakeholders. This is exacerbated by our academic interactions that prefer distanced critique and passive resistance over dialogue and action, and privilege organizational over academic citizenship. Second, although a few of these critiques suggest *some* changes, their proposals for transformation typically remain generic, partial, and fragmented rather than presenting a concrete, comprehensive, and coherent alternative. Third, this critique is seldomly accompanied by real action, nor by consistent change in our daily working practices. Oftentimes, it merely demands that “**someone do something** (without specifying the detail of either)” (Parker, 2023: 1291). As such, Wenzel et al. (2025) suggest that we risk merely reproducing the status quo by providing a stand-alone analysis of the dysfunctionalities of academia that—though thought-provoking—preaches only to the converted.

We are dedicated to challenge this tradition by engaging in what Wenzel et al. (2025) identify as “caring impact,” operating at the intersection of the practical and emancipatory types of impact and combining a deep-seated understanding of the issues with a clear transformation pathway. Hence, rather than focusing on curing or even suppressing the symptoms of “dark academia,” we advocate a concrete, comprehensive, and coherent re-imagination of our academic **values**—that is, the norms that underpin our academic profession—advocating research quality, sound and inclusive research processes, holistic and synergistic careers, and the positive impact of our academic achievements on stakeholders. In doing so, we give substance to the “**something**” in the above quote by clearly outlining *what* needs changing. We thus follow Jones’s (2025) suggestion to embody the hitherto less explored third theme—‘taking back freedom’—rather than revisiting the two well-documented “targets” and “terror” themes as discussed in a *Management Learning* special issue on performative universities (Jones et al., 2020).

We also passionately believe that we need a strong focus on action, not just *calling* for it—as many before us have done—but outlining clearly *how* we can make a difference through changing our academic **interactions**—that is, the mutual or reciprocal action or influence between individuals—in ways that prioritize dialogue, voice and action, multi-faceted collegiality, and collective

care. We thus provide substance to the “do,” outlining *how* we can achieve the “something,” that is, our transformed academic values. However, we also speak to the “someone” who ought to do something. Rather than focusing on grand gestures, we argue that action can be made up of small daily practices (Brown and Loza, 2024; Kjærgaard et al., 2024; Ratle et al., 2020) that everyone can get involved in (Jones et al., 2020) through individual and collective agency (Jones, 2025). We thus propose a collective transformation—defined as “the capacity of people in a system to create a fundamentally new one” (Colombo, 2024: 7), in our case a more Positive Academia. In doing so, we turn the spotlight on what we as academics *can* still do within our current external constraints rather than seeing our environment as fully deterministic of our ability to act.

That said, we emphatically do *not* suggest ignoring our manifold and very real problems in academia or hiding them under a “cloak of positivity.” Positive Academia is not about putting a “happy face” on academia. Otherwise, it could easily be discarded as naïve utopianism. Instead, we see it as a heterotopia (Spicer et al., 2009), an imagination of an *alternative* mode of academic values and interactions. Heterotopias are not immune to struggle and conflict, nor will Positive Academia be. But rather than focusing all our energies on reiterating the many dysfunctionalities of academia, or addressing or even suppressing its isolated symptoms, we suggest to reflexively use our current crisis as an impetus for positive transformation by articulating and acting upon desirable futures (Colombo, 2024). We argue that too often we ignore the inconvenient truth that we have co-created the current state of academia, and are still doing so, through our own (in) actions (Alvesson et al., 2017; Parker, 2023; Schneider et al., 2021). As Management academics, we readily embrace the convenient falsehood that we are “unwilling victims of all-powerful senior managers” (Fleming and Harley, 2024: 186), instead of acknowledging our messy reality without clear goodies and baddies (Spicer and Alvesson, 2025). In our essay, we will thus provoke you to consider how all of us as individual academics *can* make a difference by unleashing the power of parallel action, supported by the collective action frames provided in this provocation essay which facilitate both overt and subtle activism (Kjærgaard et al., 2024).

Finally, we recognize the irony of introducing Positive Academia in the current context of precarity, widespread redundancies, and a prevailing “put up and shut up” attitude. However, we argue that this creates all the more urgency to re-imagine academia, we cannot just sit still and wait until the storm blows over, thinking we are going to go back to the sunny uplands. These sunny uplands are now well and truly out of sight. And arguably, this academic “utopia” never really existed or if it did it was only ever accessible to a privileged group of academics. At a time where academia’s *raison-d’être* of knowledge creation is severely impacted by generative AI, and where universities and experts are no longer “the flavour of the day” or are even viewed negatively by many politicians and large swathes of society, academia desperately needs a quantum shift to reclaim its legitimacy. It is thus up to all of us as academics to demonstrate universities still have a crucial role to play in our societies. We cannot unilaterally change government policies or wave a magic wand to remove our structural constraints, but we can work together to restore trust in our research and our profession and hopefully regain our own sanity in the process by being “informed, insightful and strongly motivated agents of change” (Hibbert, 2025: 112).

Having discussed the *why* of Positive Academia, the next section explains *how* we co-created our ideas for a heterotopic future through reflexivity and a dialogue between the two authors, an early and a late career academic. Subsequently, we present our detailed re-imagination of the *what*—a change in our academic values—and the *how*—a change in our academic interactions—that is needed to replace our vicious cycle of critique with a virtuous cycle of positive transformation. We conclude our provocation essay by calling upon you to join our PACT (Positive Academia Collective Transformation).

How did we co-create our re-imagination?

Our essay's co-creation process draws on the four elements of impactful research as defined by MacIntosh et al. (2017): *reflexivity* about our own positionality, a *dialogical* approach to writing, and a re-imagination of academia informed by positive *performativity* and *temporality*. We were also inspired by an *Academy of Management Review* editorial (Hernandez and Haack, 2023) suggesting that—in addition to positive performativity—*permeability*, the degree to which theory is transferable to practice, is crucial, and we therefore emphasize actionable change.

Reflexivity about our positionality

We met 5 years ago at a social media clinic, organized by the late career academic (LCA) and co-facilitated by the early career academic (ECA) who had just started a PhD in media studies, and have been discussing the “world of academia” ever since. We both play a leading role in CYGNA, a network supporting female academics and have co-founded Positive Academia CIC. Here, we provide a brief window into our academic background and our motivation to create a more positive, sustainable, and inclusive academia.

ECA: I began my career in my teens in my birth country, Switzerland, early in the 21st century. My career journey encompasses a degree, industry and academic experience in Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Research & Development, a degree in Business and Management, and a PhD in Media Practices. After my PhD completion in 2023, I joined the University of Westminster Business School as a permanent full-time researcher and lecturer in Management and Marketing. I feel strongly about bridging theory and practice, both in my teaching and in my research in Organizational Culture and Change. Creating positive societal impact through championing sustainability, inclusion, and equity is what motivates me as an academic. This multi-faceted path defines me, a lifelong learner, researcher, innovator, creator, educator, and mentor committed to re-imagining academia and empowering others to thrive.

LCA: I started working in universities in my birth country, the Netherlands, as a student tutor in the late 1980s. Feeling “at home” in the world of academia, I embarked on a PhD funded by part-time lecturing jobs, moving to my first secure employment in the United Kingdom in the mid/late 1990s. Early in the 21st century, I moved to a top research university in Australia, climbing up the ranks to full professor, transforming the Department's PhD program and championing the Faculty's research as Associate Dean. Most recently, in the decade before my early retirement, I job-crafted a staff development role in the United Kingdom at a teaching-intensive university that prioritizes societal impact. My leadership roles sparked a strong interest in discovering and practicing ways to make academia more sustainable and inclusive. As a very strong introvert, fighting on the barricades never appealed to me, so instead I help my many mentees through small daily actions, and support the wider academic community through free online resources on my website.

A dialogical approach to writing

Our essay employs a quasi-dialogical approach (Contu, 2020); we use a personal “you” when addressing you as the reader and include ourselves when we talk about “we” as academics. Likewise, writing this essay was a dialogical process through repeated iteration between our

perspectives as ECA and LCA, iterative reading, questioning of the currently dominant academic values and interactions, and a re-imagination of alternative ones. We preface our six re-imagined elements of Positive Academia with representative fragments of our dialogues. This also allows us to clarify our respective contributions, the LCA focusing on the *why* and *what* of Positive Academia (the move from critique to imagining alternative futures and the re-imagination of our academic values) and the ECA focusing on the *how* (the focus on action and the re-imagination of our academic interactions). In our collaboration, the LCA brings a depth of experience, academic rigor, and a profound understanding of the current challenges in academia. The ECA brings energy and curiosity, a passion for innovation and creativity, and an eagerness to experiment with new approaches. Our partnership taught us that **collaboration across career stages is not only enriching—it is essential**. The LCA's wisdom and steadiness have given the ECA the confidence to take risks, while the ECA's energy and curiosity have infused new vitality into the LCA's vision.

A provocation emphasizing performativity, permeability, and temporality

Our essay is positively *performative* in its provision of a blueprint for an academic heterotopia (Spicer et al., 2009), an imagination of an alternative mode of academic values and interactions. That said, our alternative values and interactions are formulated in generic terms. They should not be seen as rigid prescriptions, nor be implemented without reflexivity or questioning of their potential unintended consequences. For example, although our recommended focus on Open Science enhances research integrity and credibility, it might also reinforce structural inequalities in some contexts by requiring resources that not all researchers and institutions have access to (Deer et al., 2025). Our re-imagination is intended to *broaden* our options, not to replace one straitjacket with another!

We practice Boyer's scholarship of synthesis (Boyer, 1990), blending our lived experience, prior research literature, key opinion pieces, and policy changes in Higher Education, to paint a comprehensive picture of both the current state of academia and our provocation toward an alternative future. Thus, our re-imagination is not a radical call for change, it is an *actionable* synthesis, offering high levels of *permeability*. We take a systemic approach, however, arguing the six aspects of our re-imagination are mutually reinforcing, each having the potential to act as a leverage point (Colombo, 2024) in a transformation of academic values and interactions. When pursued in unison they allow us to go beyond suppressing the symptoms of a dysfunctional academic world or even curing the underlying illness; instead, they present us with a positive way forward for academia to flourish.

We also emphasize the importance of *temporality*. In our re-imagination of academic values and interactions, we focus on change as a *process*, not on a linear journey or an arbitrary, fixed endpoint of change. We embrace the false starts, detours, wrong turns, and even the occasional dead ends in our journey; the key is simply to keep going. Our mission for Positive Academia is to *shift our perspective* toward a more positive, sustainable and inclusive academia. It does not have a "happily ever after" ending, it will thus always remain a "work in progress" and also interacts with varying and changing contexts.

We acknowledge that this context dependency might limit the scalability of our approach (Wenzel et al., 2025) beyond the field of Management studies. However, (critical) management studies are by no means alone in critiquing current-day academia. Moreover, our manifold day-to-day interactions with academics across countries and disciplines suggest that our re-imagined values and interactions resonate with academics worldwide, spanning disciplines ranging from Archeology to Zoology. Obviously, the specific nuances are likely to differ across disciplines,

Table 1. Re-imagining our academic values.

Dominant values	(Unintended) detrimental consequences	Alternative values
What outputs do we value?		
Publication quantity	Explosion of publications and number of co-authors; rise of research misconduct; growth of predatory journals; collapse of peer review; toxic cultures	Reduce publication quantity to focus on high-quality papers and meaningful co-authorship relations
Publications in top journals (research quality measured by journal proxies)	Focus on demands of top journals; theory fetish; HARKing; p-hacking	Broader operationalization of research quality including research <i>processes</i> and the <i>impact</i> of our research
Standard empirical or theoretical journal articles	Neglect of different types of publications; homogeneous, formulaic journal articles	Value other types of <i>outputs</i> (e.g. books, chapters, reports, data, code, tools, peer reviews); value other types of <i>articles</i> (e.g. essays, replications, book reviews, methods articles)
What do we value: the destination or the journey?		
Focus on the <i>destination</i> (journal outputs) rather than the <i>journey</i> (research processes)	See above	Value research <i>processes</i> underpinning the creation of high-quality research: integrity, openness, inclusive research cultures, peer review
What do we value in academic career profiles?		
Singular focus on research metrics (publications, citations, research funding)	Lopsided and siloed academic careers, devaluation of teaching, service/leadership, and engagement with practice/policy	Holistic careers that value all academic roles, and see them as synergistic
What do we value in our definition of career success?		
Metricized individual academic achievements	Competitive and toxic cultures; long working hours; hero-worshipping of star performers	Our positive impact on <i>others</i> : the academic community, practice, policy makers, students, and civic community

countries and university systems; as a reader we therefore encourage you to reflect carefully on what elements of our transformation are likely to be the most effective leverage points in *your* context.

The what—re-imagining our academic values

Our heterotopic re-imagination of our academic values includes a shift from publication quantity to quality and a concomitant broadening of our scholarly outputs, a move from our research as an output-maximizing paper-producing-machine toward a scholarly *journey* underpinned by sound, open, and inclusive research processes, a change from our lopsided academic careers to holistic and synergistic alternatives, and a redefinition of our career success away from purely individual achievements toward the positive *impact* these achievements have on others. Table 1 summarizes the academic values currently dominant in most university/country settings, outlines their (unintended) detrimental consequences, and suggests alternative values helping us to address these concerns.

Outputs: from quantity to quality, from homogeneity to diversity

- ECA:** *Like many ECAs, I face considerable pressure to “produce” articles for tenure and promotion and to enhance my institution’s research profile. This diminishes the vibrancy of our academic research culture as academics instrumentally focus their collaborations on topics that appeal to prestigious journals, leading to recognized yet meaningless outputs. The quality of my academic contributions is vital to me; they are an integral part of my identity. I also see the collaborations underpinning them as valuable in their own right and only work with those I value rather than just adding my name to publications.*
- LCA:** *The long publication records and large number of co-authors that have become the norm in recent decades astonish me. I averaged 2–3 publications a year only by embracing a wide variety of outlets. Many of my papers took 3–5 years to mature into meaningful contributions, and I rarely had more than two co-authors. I just can’t imagine having an intellectual exchange with more than one or two co-authors. For me co-authoring is like a theatre play; you build competence and trust through repeated interaction. But many academics seem to prefer film acting, just turn up, do your bit, and move on to the next project . . .*

Shifting our emphasis from quantity to quality is a *conditio-sine-qua-non* in our re-imagining of academic values. Without it, implementing the five other elements of our re-imagination is simply infeasible. A focus on maximization of outputs and co-authors crowds out sound and inclusive research processes, holistic and synergistic careers, and due consideration of research impact; it also strains our academic interactions. Unfortunately, journal articles have become our “unit of currency in academic research” (Davis, 2015: 181), written to be published rather than to be read (Marinetto, 2018; Parker, 2023). This has caused a veritable explosion of publications (Hanson et al., 2024) and a rapidly increasing number of co-authors. It also causes our peer review systems to buckle (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2023) and increases the likelihood of type-2 errors, rejection of high-quality papers by inexperienced reviewers and overloaded editors. Finally, it ignores the importance of reflection or “intellectual dwelling” (Kjærgaard et al., 2024), allowing our ideas to mature through prioritizing thinking over productivity, and broad over narrow reading (Marinetto, 2018). We therefore suggest radically reframing our view of publishing, putting our energies into a few meticulously crafted mature studies rather than dozens of shallow pieces (Elbanna and Child, 2023).

Crucially, when referring to research quality we are *not* referring to the outlets in which our research is published (Lindebaum and Hibbert, 2024). Our relentless focus on publishing in top journals is *as* damaging as chasing publication quantity (Rasheed and Priem, 2020). It resulted in dysfunctionalities such as our theory fetish, an increase in questionable research practices, and a hero-worshipping of star performers (Kulik, 2023) “scoring” on this reductive performance metric. Instead, we advocate focusing on the *intrinsic* quality of the research itself, including its underlying *processes* and (potential) *impact* on our communities—whether scholarly, practice, policy, educational, or civic. We elaborate on this in our sections on the research process and research impact.

Our focus on top journal publications also caused a devaluation of other output types. And even when focusing on journal articles alone, we favor a narrower set of formats than most other disciplines (Bal et al., 2025). We therefore call for a fundamental reframing of what we value as “legitimate” publications: the presence of books, chapters, methodological articles, replication studies,

pedagogical and practitioner articles, reports, essays, and book reviews should be seen as a *strength* rather as a *weakness* in our publication portfolios. It signals a wide-ranging set of academic skills and contributions, a profound interest in our discipline's progress, and our ability to speak to different audiences. Moreover, more attention to our research *processes* implies that research tools, materials, data and code, as well as peer review reports should be considered as part of our *portfolio* of research outputs too.

Research processes: from destination to journey

ECA: *My peers seem to talk about nothing else but publishing in journals on the ABS list [a ranking of journals used in many British Business Schools]. I prefer to focus on doing meaningful work instead and simply enjoy the crafting process. Toxic research cultures also present a real challenge for many ECAs. Top-down demands from senior academics impinge on our individual freedom and can lead to harassment and exploitation, such as pressures to take shortcuts and present false data.*

LCA: *Yes, the detrimental impact of journal rankings and predatory publishing really became evident in the mid-2000s; I even did some research about them! Looking back, I realize I was merely exposing the symptoms of a competitive, hierarchical, and neoliberal academia—as so many have done before and after me—rather than wondering what caused the illness. So, now I firmly focus on building supportive, inclusive and collaborative research cultures that allow ECAs—our academic future!—to flourish by making their own choices.*

Seeing journal articles as the key signifier of research performance has narrowed our purpose from the *journey* of scholarship to its *destination* (Livingston et al., 2024). It ignores the research *processes* that are underlying research outputs, neglecting the many scholarly activities that sustain our academic life (Agate et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2017). Although research processes are less tangible—and thus less quantifiable—than inputs (funding) and outputs (publications), they are usually considered to include research integrity, Open Science, and inclusive research cultures. Research integrity is often framed negatively, referring to our non-reproducible, non-transparent research procedures, the biases we introduce by p-hacking and suppression of our negative results (Ioannidis, 2024), or even our engagement in outright misconduct (Honig et al., 2018). Others discuss it in a more positive light, promoting the concept of soundness in our research processes that includes thoroughness, completeness, appropriate standards of evidence and probity, but also more breadth and diversity in our research activities (Moore et al., 2017). In both cases, however, our attention is drawn to the crucial importance of our research *processes*, not just the research *outcomes*.

Open science takes us one step further by focusing on openness of our research processes, making it a key facilitator of research integrity. It advocates that “scientific knowledge of all kinds [. . .] should be openly accessible, transparent, rigorous, reproducible, replicable, accumulative, and inclusive” (Parsons et al., 2022). While not yet commonplace in Management, it has made great strides in related disciplines such as Psychology, and more recently Economics and Marketing (see Deer et al., 2025). It includes preregistration of our research, documentation of our materials, data and code, open access to our papers, and communication of our results to a wider audience, including non-academics. Its associated process of open peer review (Dobusch and Heimstädt, 2019) includes open reports—reviews published next to papers—and transparent peer review,

thereby acknowledging the laborious work that many of us do as the “hidden supporting cast” (Hibbert, 2025: 110) of reviewers (and editors) as an integral part of research processes.

Finally, alarm calls about toxic, exclusionary academic cultures are increasingly prevalent. Resulting from our single-minded focus on outputs and research efficiency, they are characterized by research misconduct, power abuse, bullying, and harassment (see, for example, Wellcome Trust, 2020), leading to serious mental health problems for many of us. Addressing these issues necessitates changing our academic interactions, as discussed below. Here we simply note that a focus on inclusive research cultures doesn’t come at the *expense* of excellence, it will simply allow *more* of us to excel by recognizing a broader set of contributions (Casci and Adams, 2020; Moore et al., 2017). Moreover, success in outputs is linked to factors beyond research quality (e.g. connections, experience, selling power) and thus disadvantages ECAs and non-traditional researchers (Agate et al., 2020), whereas focusing on sound research processes provides all of us with opportunities to shine. In addition to broadening our definition of research quality to include our research processes, we next suggest broadening our views on what is valued in our academic careers.

Holistic and synergistic careers: from lopsided siloes to interconnected narratives

ECA: *As a scholar with a deep-seated passion for transforming our institutions and society, my academic journey differs from the norm. My path so far encompasses chemistry, pharmaceutical research, business, and media, creating a tapestry of disciplines that enrich one another and foster change through fresh perspectives. Rather than producing countless papers and accumulating research accolades, I aspire a multi-faceted career with a commitment to reshaping academia through a mutually reinforcing blend of research, teaching, and external engagement.*

LCA: *It is so inspiring to hear your views! I was very much socialized into the “research is all that counts” rhetoric. Teaching and university service were tick box activities to fulfill to minimum standards; service to the discipline wasn’t seen as terribly important. Not feeling comfortable with this, I spent countless hours on non—research activities, which—together with high standards of research excellence—meant very long working weeks. More balance would have definitely created more job satisfaction for me, not seeing my desire to help others devalued as a “waste of time.”*

We fully support holistic scholarship, displayed in abundance by *Management Learning’s* founding editor Mark Easterby-Smith, and embodied in “pluralism, community building, nurturing and developing individuals and the field” (Robinson et al., 2022: 365), all concepts that will re-appear in our academic interactions section. However, we interpret valuing holistic careers slightly differently, namely as a focus on diversity in our academic careers and the synergistic nature of our different academic roles. Our myopic focus on metricized research performance as the key signifier of our career success has devalued teaching, administration, leadership, and external engagement (Anderson et al., 2021). Common terminology such as “research time,” “teaching load,” and “administrative duties” only reinforces this hierarchy. Moreover, in most institutions, academics on teaching or practice contracts are neither given proper recognition nor sufficient rewards, leading to a dismal lack of career progression. In contrast, as academics in leadership positions, we do secure influence, career progression, and material rewards, but we are often demonized by our colleagues (Cassell, 2024), causing a dearth of positive leadership role models. We therefore call on universities to support more diversity in our career paths, underpinned by a “portfolio approach,” that is, the realization that not every academic should be expected to excel in *every* aspect of our

multi-faceted academic careers as long as the total *portfolio* of our activities meets the university's mission.

Our academic careers are not only lopsided but also siloed, with our different roles often fulfilled in disconnected and compartmentalized ways, rather than being leveraged for their synergistic potential around what lies at the core of our universities: knowledge creation and exchange (Seno-Alday, 2021). Research-informed teaching is crucial in educating our students as responsible and critical citizens, but our students can also be a fruitful source of research ideas themselves. In our university leadership roles, why not apply our own research in strategy, entrepreneurship, organizational behavior, and HRM to the management of our universities, which are after all highly complex, knowledge-based institutions (Seno-Alday, 2021). Likewise, our leadership roles can broaden our research portfolio. As Research Dean, the LCA embarked on a research program in academic performance evaluation, allowing her to further both knowledge and practice on more inclusive forms of research evaluation. Finally, through a focus on research *processes* and research *impact* rather than only research *outputs*, we can transform our elitist “from the ivory tower” knowledge *transfer* in our external engagement into knowledge *exchange* and truly value *co-creation* (Thomas and Ambrosini, 2021).

More generally, moving from our lopsided siloes to interconnected career narratives allows us to forge unique identities as individuals (and universities). This inspires us to be daringly different (Robinson et al., 2023), rather than to engage in mimicry with globally dominant players. Moreover, it creates positive externalities by encouraging us to work with our local communities, rather than idolizing supposedly “global” topics. In our next section, we elaborate on how a general move from focusing on our achievements to focusing on our impact can transform our role in society as academics.

Career success: from achievement to impact

ECA: *When I was a primary school pupil, my uncle, contemplating his future as a musician, said he didn't wish to pursue a PhD as it was primarily about writing and wouldn't create a genuine impact, unlike playing music for others. I realized that this was the person I aspired to be. As a pharmaceutical researcher I took pride in knowing that my efforts helped patients around the world; I was keen to make a difference in academia too. I was surprised, however, to find many academics indifferent to this idea. One individual even remarked, “Why do you care about impact? We only need papers for promotion!”*

LCA: *That's so beautiful. I'll be brutally honest here. Initially, research impact simply equaled citations for me, at best it meant changing the disciplinary discourse. I was proud of my recognition as highly-cited researcher and my best paper awards. Only much later in life I discovered the more enduring satisfaction of research that makes a difference outside academia. That said, I have always prioritized impact on others in my formal and informal leadership roles; the service awards I received for this now mean infinitely more to me now than any of my research awards.*

On our academic CVs, we proudly list our publications, our successful funding applications, our rising citation levels, our excellent teaching evaluations, our various awards, and our leadership roles. We “humbly” share our achievements on social media and congratulate others on theirs. However, this focus on our achievements obscures the equally—if not more—important *impact* that our achievements have on *others* (Livingston et al., 2024) by making a positive difference to their lives. Although many of us entered academia to make a difference to others “most of what we

do doesn't matter much to anyone but ourselves" (Harley, 2019: 267). For many of us, our career achievements are exactly that, achievements to further our *own* careers. However, they could be so much more . . .

Instead of seeing our publications as the final destination of our scholarship journey, why don't we reframe research "outcomes" as the positive *impact* that our research has on others through scholarly, practical, societal, policy or educational impact (Wickert et al., 2021). The call for practical relevance in Management is obviously far from new; the rigor versus relevance debate has been raging for half a century, and special issues on it proliferate (MacIntosh et al. 2017). Now joined by the call for societal/policy impact, this multi-faceted interpretation of impact may make prioritization and implementation in our daily practice challenging. But help is at hand. The effective altruism approach to research (Kassirer et al., 2023) is a helpful decision tool for *where* to focus our efforts, whereas the post-heroic perspective on impact demonstrates *how* our impact emerges from focused, intentional practices over time (Friesike et al., 2022).

We passionately believe, however, that our impact as scholars extends *far* beyond our research. As Hibbert (2025) argues, much of our scholarly impact might occur not through what we *write*, but through who we *are* and what we *do* in our reviewing and editing, teaching, and leadership (Hibbert, 2025). In our editing and reviewing, we can develop the potential of our entire scholarly community rather than see this role as a gatekeeping process. In our teaching, rather than focusing on our numerical teaching evaluations, we can consider how we transformed our students' lives through developing their critical thinking skills, facilitating their maturation as resilient and independent learners, and improving their employability. Spencer et al. (2022) even demonstrate how—through teaching experienced students—we can develop managers who generate impact. In our leadership and service, rather than relishing our prestigious job titles, why don't we redirect our attention outwards and celebrate how our leadership has made a positive difference for our stakeholders, whether they are colleagues, students or the civic community.

The how—re-imagining our academic interactions

After outlining the *what* of our academic heterotopia, we now turn to the *how* of achieving it, that is, re-imagining our academic interactions, integrating contributions from critical management studies and positive organizational scholarship (Lavine et al., 2022). We would like us to be brave enough to change our predominant modus operandi from distanced critique, passive resistance, silence, and anomie (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2024; Watermeyer et al., 2024) toward developing and amplifying our own voices and those of others to create positive paths for action, and from *organizational* citizenship toward *academic* citizenship, including a culture of collective care (Fleming and Harley, 2024; Gavin et al., 2024; Kenworthy et al., 2025). Table 2 summarizes the academic interactions currently dominant in most university/country settings, outlines their (unintended) detrimental consequences, and suggests alternative interactions helping us to address these concerns.

Using dialogical principles to develop voice and action

LCA: *I vividly recall that—after being the first woman to be promoted to full professor—I publicly questioned my department's constant ratcheting up of standards. The other professors—all promoted at a time where standards were less demanding—told me "we don't like it either, but we are with our back against the wall." My response: "we are not prisoners of war in front of a firing squad. We can talk back." Ever since, I have fought for the*

Table 2. Re-imagining our academic interactions.

Dominant interactions	(Unintended) detrimental consequences	Alternative interactions
How do we use our voice and action?		
Engage in distanced critique, passive resistance, silence and anomie	Creates a cycle of introspection; sustains rather than fixes our problems; may leave us cynical, depleted, and demotivated	Engage in dialogue to develop and amplify voices of self and others; build momentum for individual and collective (subtle) activism
How do we sustain our academic community?		
Engage in <i>organizational</i> citizenship, that is, being compelled as academics to fulfill uncouted duties to support peers	Feeling subjected to concertive control through a combination of (positive) horizontal peer-to-peer norms and (negative) vertical compulsion	Engage in <i>academic</i> citizenship as an independent community of experts, through individual professional autonomy, participation in university governance/decision-making; create a culture of collective care

women that came after me. What's your view on this? How can senior academics use their voice and action to help ECAs.

ECA: *It's important for them to speak out and push for change, just as you have. Equally crucial though, is giving ECAs the opportunity to develop their own voice. My journey to discovering my academic voice required time and was shaped by both exploration and collaboration. What supported me the most was the empowerment I received from LCAs who valued my independence. Their focus wasn't on perfection but rather on fostering my ability to tackle my own personal and professional challenges. This ultimately allowed me to express myself when necessary and articulate my needs and goals to stakeholders.*

Dialogue is a “process by which all participants are open to the possibility of being changed [. . .], sometimes in uncomfortable and discomfoting ways” (MacIntosh et al., 2017: 6). It allows us to develop our own and others’ voices. However, this first requires us to face our predominant culture of silence, enabled by managerial conformity, and driven by our feelings of fear and futility (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2024). Silence, thus, becomes our justified norm, suppressing dissenting opinions, merely expressing resistance to our peers while complying with managerial demands. It inhibits meaningful dialogue about the impact of neoliberal policies and politics on scholarship and social justice (Contu, 2020) and discourages sharing our diverse perspectives, essential for fostering the cultures of collective care we discuss in the next section. Thus, we advocate accepting dialogue as pivotal for humanizing our academic cultures, leading to more equitable, inclusive, and harmonious academic interactions. Matched with consciousness raising and critical reflection, cooperation-based dialogue is also our first step toward taking back freedom (Jones, 2025).

However, solely developing our voices is not enough, taking the responsibility to *act* is what leads us to positive transformation. Intellectual **Activism** (Contu, 2020) supports this through critical, reflexive thinking taken *beyond* publishing critical articles and requires more proactive attitudes from all of us, but especially from senior academics. Although many (Alvesson et al., 2017; Fleming and Harley, 2024; Rasheed and Priem, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2024) reprimand senior academics for assuming they must “toe the line,” Szkudlarek and Alvesson (2024) present a more comprehensive perspective on silent compliance by those with the power to act. They demonstrate this is not just driven by structural and cultural factors, but also by our individual choices that are

often motivated by convenience and opportunism. Rather than seeing this as a fatalistic account, however, let's use it as a call to all of us to avail ourselves of the opportunities we *do* have for voice and action. Even those of us in junior and/or precarious positions may discover these opportunities in small acts of “counter-terror,” fighting back through local spontaneous action (Ratle et al., 2020) or subtle activism which pushes the “iron cage” of academia “by experimenting with quietly unsettling norms rather than overtly opposing or rejecting them” (Kjærgaard et al., 2024: 413).

Finally, as exemplified in this essay, we advocate an active dialogue between different generations of scholars to create compassion for different perspectives on academia. Our emphasis should be on *reciprocity*, a culture where all of us as early, mid, and late career academics can learn from *each other*, rather than treating LCAs as the “fountain of wisdom.” As an ECA you can serve as a progressive thought leader in impact-driven research rather than needing to be helped and mentored, that is, hosting the party rather than waiting to be invited (Wierenga et al., 2025). Likewise, as an ECA you can be spearheading the move to Open Science and sound and inclusive research cultures (Kent et al., 2022). Where those of us who are LCAs are well-positioned to help is in identifying the “pain points” in our current structures and using our leverage to change them. As we discuss next, practicing multi-faceted collegiality is a crucial avenue for this.

Collegiality: from organizational to academic citizenship and a culture of collective care

LCA: *As a young academic I read Anne Huff's “Wives of the organization,” describing the service-oriented “wifely” duties many female academics fulfill in their institutions. Re-reading it now, I can't believe how relevant it still is, and how accurately it describes how I acted over the decades. I somehow felt this was expected of me as a “female foreign” academic, needing to be a “good organization citizen.” But now I am wondering, aren't there other—more effective—ways to be collegial. What do you think?*

ECA: *I agree gender identity is important to many. However, when you introduced me to “Wives of the organization” it did not really resonate with me. As a female scientist in multinationals, I wasn't treated differently from men. In academia, I have been blessed by working in a school with a strong focus on intersectionality, looking beyond gender to other marginalized identities, which is crucial to me. Moreover, to me collegiality transcends individual institutions and occurs in formal or informal academic networks through supporting others by sharing resources and ideas.*

Collegiality fosters a supportive, non-hierarchical, cooperative atmosphere and—as we will discuss—can manifest in many different ways (Fleming and Harley, 2024; Gavin et al., 2024; Kenworthy et al., 2025). However, it is subverted by the neoliberal tendency to formalize it in support of metrified individual and organizational performances. In that context, collegiality is seen as *organizational* citizenship—our willingness to engage in “uncounted tasks,” such as mentoring, committee work, and stepping in for colleagues. This managerial approach to collegiality easily turns into concertive control through the combination of our (positive) horizontal peer-to-peer norms of collegiate behavior and the (negative) vertical compulsion to fulfill uncounted duties (Fleming and Harley, 2024; Jones, 2025). Moreover, organizational citizenship suffers from a strong gender bias, women are more likely to be asked for these roles and less likely to refuse them (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2025). Women are expected to be “organizational team-players,” leaving male academics free to pursue their own careers.

Drawing on and extending Fleming and Harley's (2024) thesis, we therefore argue that mitigating these detrimental managerial effects is possible if all of us—at levels appropriate to our career stage—engage in four distinct forms of collegiality, moving us from *organizational* to *academic* citizenship, and co-creating a culture of collective care. First, as an independent community of experts—as editors and reviewers, or as role holders in professional organizations—many of us hold the keys to unlocking progress toward our re-imagined academic values. We can champion quality and diversity in outputs, insist on open and sound research processes, and welcome research with societal impact. Second, in using our own individual professional autonomy, we can all take individual and collective responsibility for our own daily actions, walking rather than talking the talk, and leading by example. Third, instead of ignoring our university's governance, we can embrace its opportunity to influence decision-making, engaging in “infestation from the inside rather than attack from the outside” (Spicer et al., 2009: 548, see also Hibbert, 2025).

Finally, we can all enact collective collegiality—a type of care—that transcends different forms of collegiality and is rooted in “a sense of togetherness and in communal values” (Gavin et al., 2024: 4, see also Jones, 2025). This does not require us to make grand gestures, every little action counts. Encouraging a colleague, appreciating somebody's work, showing gratitude to a mentor; they reflect the small actions we can all engage in on a daily basis, contributing to the building of a culture of collective care (Brown and Loza, 2024). Combined with our willingness to embark on anti-individualist actions (Kjærgaard et al., 2024) such as acknowledging our dependence on others and articulating our vulnerability, they can also help us to counteract the atomization of academic life (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2024).

Forming a PACT: every little action counts

ECA: *I have learned that building something impactful requires three key elements: passion, collaboration, and consistency. **Passion** isn't isolated; it is contagious. Together, we weave a narrative that demonstrates how much academia can offer when approached with hope and purpose of a shared vision. **Collaboration** isn't just about numbers; it is about building a community. A network of people united by a common goal can create a ripple effect. Slowly but surely, we can build a collective legacy that surpasses what anyone could have achieved alone. Pursuing small steps **consistently** can add to something much larger. Meaningful change comes from showing up, again and again, with intention and purpose.*

We have outlined our heterotopic ideas for a more Positive Academia, envisaging a full re-imagination of our academic values and interactions. Although providing sufficient detail for permeable collective action frames, our re-imagination isn't meant to be prescriptive; we are simply *broadening* our collective options, not replacing one straitjacket with another! Instead, we aim to inspire all of you to reflect on *your* role in creating an academic heterotopia, following Colombo's (2024) pathways of scaling transformation through scaling *out* (reaching more academics), scaling *with* (engaging in collaboration), and scaling *down* (senior academics relinquishing privilege and unlocking time and resources for juniors). This may ultimately allow us to both scale *up* (changing our academic systems) and scale *deep* (shifting our academic culture).

This will not be an easy or quick fix. We acknowledge that a single-minded focus on publication quantity and top journals, on research *outputs* over research *processes*, on careers privileging research over other academic roles, and on individual achievements over impact is still “baked

into” many of our national and institutional systems. Thus, any change will need to be gradual, shifting toward our re-imagined future together in a *collective* process. This means we need to consider any concerns as an impetus for discussion, maintaining dignity and self-respect for all, rather than launching processes that treat those of us not yet “with it” as obstructive luddites. As senior leaders and academics at all career stages alike we thus need to navigate a space where we learn from both tensions and opportunities, and, crucially, learn from each other. As we have argued in this provocation essay, we see the leveraging of synergies between ECAs and LCAs—and mid-career academics for that matter—as essential in moving toward our academic heterotopia. In this balancing act, it is vital that we celebrate small wins but also accept small losses as highlighting areas for (further) improvement, thus combining individual and collective voices and actions—no matter how small—into our **Positive Academia Collective Transformation (PACT)**.

We define **Positive Academia** as *a professional reform movement that advocates a transformation of our academic values and interactions to develop sustainable and inclusive universities. It transforms our knowledge into positive impact for our academic communities and society at large through our high—quality, societally relevant, research—underpinned by research processes that are sound, open, and inclusive—our holistic and synergistic careers, including our research-informed teaching and leadership, and our external engagement that is focused on co-creation. It is realized by emphasizing our power of dialogue, voice, and action, and supported by our multi-faceted collegiality and care.*

Key to our provocation, however, is a fundamental change in our perspectives: creating **Positive Academia** is a responsibility for *all* of us, it is a **Collective Transformation**. No matter who you are, where you are, or what you do in academia, you *can* contribute. Some of us can enter power structures to advocate for structural and cultural changes, and either be leaders who take a stance or support them (Cassell, 2024). All of us can engage in what Korica (2022) labels “relational action,” changing our interpersonal dynamics and “living” a better academia, and in what Kjærgaard et al. (2024) call “subtle activism.” If we all do what we *can*, we *can* make a difference. Every little action counts as it is part of the “*infinitesimal collective mechanisms of agentic resistant power*” Jones (2025: 96). Over time, small local initiatives can grow into worldwide movements (Kent et al., 2022) that leave a legacy. And remember, leaving a legacy is not about being remembered for *what* we have achieved; it is about creating something that endures, something that inspires *others* to carry the torch. It is not a solitary endeavor; it is built in partnership through the relationships we nurture and the communities we serve. We therefore invite *all* of you to join our PACT and be part of our collective transformation process and the future of Positive Academia.

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