

## **Forging academic identities from within: Lessons from the Ancient World**

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Changing social attitudes to knowledge (Henkel 2007) and the nature of education (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010) have created crises of identity for many academics. The democratisation of knowledge plus conceptions of the knowledge society, have eroded notions of academic expertise and autonomy (Henkel 2007), as academics are demoted from transmitters of specialised knowledge, to purveyors of mass professional training (Henkel 2007). This demotion continues apace as the rise of MOOCs and other online learning provision leads to further commodification of work and division of academic labour (Poon 2006). There is a resulting 'unbundling' of academic work (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010) across the teaching-research divide, typified by the rise of those 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch 2008) who straddle professional support and academic roles.

Academic hierarchies continue to affect the positioning of individuals who learn to shape identities against the three elements of academic work - research, teaching and service - within performative regimes (White 2012). Arguably, feelings of powerlessness and lack of self-affirmation (perhaps even low self-esteem) beset many contemporary academics, as they struggle to forge new academic identities whilst juggling disaggregation of roles alongside increasing professional commitments and accountability.

Ancient philosophers would not have recognised the concept of low self-esteem. Philosophy flourished in the Ancient Greek world for a period spanning almost 1,000 years. During this time a bewildering succession of philosophical schools waxed and waned against the backdrop of increasing political turmoil. Whilst some schools (e.g. Stoicism) apparently preached a discourse of otherworldly success others (e.g. Epicureanism) valued present-life success. Common to many of these philosophies was a notion of securing personal autonomy by using reason to regulate the passions and with them, one's life success – a notion recently reborn under the Emotional Intelligence movement.

Individuals consulting the Ancient Greek philosophers were posing the key question haunting modern academics: how can I be a success? Answers to that question led to notions of personal excellence ( $\alphaρετη$  or virtue). Against a backdrop of political uncertainty, the assumption was made that the ingredients and the resources for securing personal and social success lay within each individual.

This session explores some of the formulae offered by Ancient Greek philosophers for securing personal success and the Good Life, offering these as a panacea or 'self-cure' for bewildered modern academics who, as White suggests, steer their identities by learning to govern themselves under performative regimes (White 2012). It is argued that, whilst the forces of global capitalism may undermine the identities and working conditions of most modern professions, academics are in the fortunate position of being able to ameliorate their situation, by using their training and gifts to intellectualise the formulae for their own contentment and success.

### **References**

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