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Between worlds, beyond boundaries: understanding pracademic contributions to social change

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue examining pracademics in development studies – professionals who bridge academic and practical domains, but whose unique role has been under-explored in the literature. Drawing on 12 contributions spanning multiple geographical contexts and methodological approaches, it analyses how pracademics navigate complex institutional landscapes, build hybrid professional identities, and create social impact. The articles reveal both common challenges and context-specific opportunities in pracademic work, while highlighting innovative approaches to knowledge production and social change. Together, they demonstrate that successful pracademic engagement requires sophisticated navigation of multiple institutional, cultural, and political contexts. This collection advances our understanding of how pracademics can enhance both scholarly research and development practice. The article concludes by proposing future directions for pracademic research, emphasising the need for institutional support, methodological diversity, intersectional identities, collaborative work, and sustainable scaling, with a particular focus on Global South contexts and perspectives.

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Introduction

The relationship between academic knowledge and practical action has long been a source of tension in the area of development studies. While the field's explicit mission is to improve human conditions and the natural environment, a persistent gap often exists between scholarly research and real-world implementation. This special issue examines the experiences of an emerging group of individuals who work to bridge this divide: pracademics, hybrids, or dual citizens who simultaneously inhabit academic and practical domains, creating new opportunities for engaged scholarship and meaningful social change.

Pracademic roles span theory-to-practice mediation, public engagement, activism, and institutional reform (Fowler et al. 2023). Playing them effectively demands a sophisticated ability to navigate multiple identities; adapt to diverse frameworks of knowledge production, while challenging the hierarchies among diverse forms of knowledge; and balance competing expectations and interests. A valuable pracademic talent consists in creating trust and respect across institutional settings

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and disciplines. Rather than alternating between two distinct identities when moving back and forth between academia and practice, pracademic identities evolve through their interaction with the various disciplinary, cultural, and institutional contexts they navigate.

The timing of this exploration is particularly relevant. Universities face mounting pressure to demonstrate public value in the form of contributions to social progress, while development practitioners increasingly recognise the importance of evidence-informed approaches (Head 2023; Nicolls 2014). Similar discussions about bridging theory and practice are occurring across many fields, from public administration to business, and from public health to policing, criminal justice, and conflict resolution. However, the field of development studies has so far offered surprisingly little systematic reflection on this intersection, despite its foundational commitment to improving lives through research-informed action.

This special issue brings together 12 articles that explore how pracademics navigate the tensions of their dual positions and identities. Through theoretical discussion, personal reflection, and empirical case studies, the contributors examine how pracademics contribute to development and social change, the challenges they face, and the institutional arrangements that enable or constrain their work. Collectively, these articles demonstrate that pracademic work involves more than simply occupying dual positions or playing dual roles – it requires navigating multiple knowledge systems, cultural frameworks, and institutional contexts.

Beyond documenting current practices, this collection points toward new paths for knowledge production and social change. The contributors show how pracademics are redefining traditional boundaries between research and practice, creating innovative approaches to complex development challenges, and building more equitable partnerships between universities, communities, and social movements. Their experiences suggest that as global challenges become increasingly complex, the ability to work effectively across domains will only become more crucial.

State of the art

The concept of pracademia has evolved significantly since its emergence in the late 1990s. The literature spans multiple academic disciplines and practice sectors, including public policy and administration (Posner 2009), business (Panda 2014), policing and criminal justice (Huey and Mitchell 2016; McCabe, Morreale, and Tahiliani 2016), the nonprofit sector (Powell et al. 2018), higher education (Dickinson and Griffiths 2023; Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2020), sports studies (Collins and Collins 2019), public health (Runkle 2014), nursing (Andrew et al. 2014), and dispute resolution (Volpe and Chandler 2001). Yet despite this broad engagement across fields, discussion of pracademics has been surprisingly scant in the area of development studies (Fowler et al. 2023).

The theoretical foundations of pracademia can be traced to Boyer's (1996) advocacy for "the scholarship of engagement", which emphasised integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives and practical knowledge into research agendas. The term "pracademics" itself was coined by Volpe and Chandler (2001), who initially used it to describe "faculty who are both scholars of conflict and its resolution as well as practitioners of conflict resolution in their own universities". Posner (2009) later expanded this concept, characterising pracademics as hybrid professionals who simultaneously inhabit academia and professional practice, playing crucial translation and coordination roles between these worlds.

Within development studies, pracademics are distinctively defined as professionals who combine scholarship with personal agency dedicated to bringing about social change, which positions them as "change agents" (Fowler et al. 2023). The literature reveals two major strands of pracademic engagement in development and social change: those who take on technical roles in development processes, and "activist scholars" or "academic activists" who explicitly combine scholarship with activism, typically by engaging with social movements (Askins 2009; Baird 2020; Burnett 2003; Flood, Martin, and Dreher 2013; Frazer 2023; Hale 2008; Weber 2006).

Pracademic roles and positions

Understanding pracademic roles and positions requires examining multiple dimensions. Powell et al. (2018) identify three key aspects: collaborative research relationships between academics and practitioners, the identity of individuals engaged simultaneously in both spheres, and their function as translators and knowledge brokers. This framework reveals the complexity of pracademic engagement, which some view as switching between distinct roles while others see it as expressing hybrid identities (Fowler et al. 2023; Macduff and Netting 2010).

Panda (2014) captures this duality by describing pracademics as having an "ambidextrous mindset", while Wasserman and Kram (2009) suggest viewing pracademia as a continuum rather than a binary. On either side of the continuum are what Wilson (2019) calls "pracs" (primarily practitioners) and "demics" (primarily academics). Macduff and Netting (2008) in turn identify three distinct varieties of pracademics: the engaged scholar, the reflective professional practitioner, and the collaborative team.

Several self-identified pracademics who responded to an online survey administered in the context of this project (Diola et al. 2022) have pointed out that pracademics are defined by more than a set of skills – they are characterised by a specific mindset and motivation, including a commitment or passion that is the source of the kind of energy that pushes pracademics to take on the numerous obstacles involved. In this sense, being a pracademic could be, at least for some, more a vocation or a calling than a simple professional career choice. Participants in early focus groups also implied that pracademic identities are not static – instead, they appear to evolve in response to career stage, among other factors. While early career pracademics are seen as focused on building credibility and navigating identity tensions, mid-career pracademics appear to often transition to roles that emphasise systemic change, such as scaling collective action or fostering institutional reform, and pracademics in the latter years of their careers are able to take more reflexive practitioner roles, as they tend to occupy more respected positions in both academic and particular development fields. This dynamic understanding of pracademic roles appears to be further validated by several contributions to the special issue.

The institutional positioning of pracademics shows considerable diversity. Some maintain active practice while holding full-time academic positions, despite such engagement often being undervalued in academic promotion systems. Others move through what Murphy and Fulda (2011) call a "revolving door" between academia and practice.

These various modes of pracademic engagement raise fundamental questions about knowledge production and institutional change. Chambers (1997) work on whose knowledge counts in development processes highlights the epistemological contributions pracademics can make, while Selznick's (2011) insights on bottom-up institutional change suggest pracademics – although this is a term that the author himself does not use – play crucial roles in transforming both academic and practice institutions. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that pracademic contributions extend far beyond simple knowledge translation, potentially reshaping how both academia and practice understand and create knowledge.

Pracademics' value and impact

The value of pracademic work extends far beyond traditional collaborative research methods that have historically dominated academia–practice partnerships in development studies. Through their unique positioning at the intersection of scholarly and practical domains, pracademics generate multiple forms of impact that transform both knowledge production and institutional practice.

At the theoretical level, pracademics contribute to knowledge generation through what Schön (1983) calls "reflective practice" – systematic analysis that yields new theoretical insights from practical experience. This process is complemented by rigorous documentation of practice, which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) demonstrate can advance both theoretical understanding and

practical knowledge. Such contributions are exemplified by Volpe and Chandler's (2001, 245) characterisation of pracademics as "a new kind of dispute resolution specialist", highlighting how their hybrid position enables novel approaches to longstanding challenges.

The institutional impact of pracademics is particularly significant. Their ability to work across boundaries makes them uniquely positioned to drive institutional change (Selznick 2011). Pracademics facilitate knowledge exchange between academic and practice communities (Bushouse et al. 2011) and translate between different institutional logics (Powell et al. 2018). This bridging function has become increasingly vital as universities face pressure to demonstrate societal impact (Head 2023) while practitioners must increasingly ground their work in evidence (Nicolls 2014).

Perhaps most significantly, pracademics make distinctive relational and reflexive contributions that transcend technical expertise (Macduff and Netting 2010). They enhance the social relevance of academic work, provide theoretically informed solutions to practical challenges, serve as critical friends and brokers between different stakeholders, facilitate inter-organisational dialogue, enrich shared vocabularies and methodologies, and raise important ethical questions that challenge both academic and practice communities.

Lastly, pracademic contributions are reflected in approaches to research that emphasise collective and team-based methodologies that enable them to pool expertise and navigate institutional barriers. Such approaches are particularly valuable in fostering locally led development, amplifying community voices, and enhancing sustainability.

About this special issue

This special issue brings together 12 articles that collectively advance our understanding of pracademics in development studies. Organised into four thematic sections, the contributions span research articles and reflective viewpoints, offering insights from diverse geographical contexts and disciplinary perspectives.

The first section examines pracademic roles and functions, beginning with Willem Elbers' analysis of his own pracademic contributions through long-term engagement with a civil society organisation. He identifies five distinct pracademic roles: theory-to-practice mediator, diplomat, empathetic listener, communicator, and critical friend. This framework is complemented by David Moxley's conceptual piece on community-engaged translatory inquiry, which positions pracademics as essential boundary-spanners who facilitate meaningful dialogue between academic institutions and communities. The section concludes with Siphe Zantsi and Mamakie Lungwana's case study of South African agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo, whose public engagement and policy influence exemplifies these roles.

The second section delves into the process of negotiating pracademic identities. Ke Lu and Shiqi Peng's research on early career pracademics in China's nonprofit sector presents a spiral model of identity formation, identifying strategies at micro, meso, and macro levels. Jennifer Eggert and Behar Sadriu examine the intersection of religious and professional identities, introducing the concept of "double brokers" and challenging the predominantly secular framing of pracademic work. Michele Fugiel Gartner's reflective piece portrays pracademic identity as a fluid, multidimensional construct, emphasising the dynamic nature of working across professional spaces. This section concludes with Jae-Eun Noh's exploration of transnational pracademic experiences, which reveals how national contexts and cultural frameworks shape pracademic identities.

The third section addresses institutional contexts and challenges that enable or constrain pracademic work. Berthold Kuhn's case studies from China and the Middle East show how political environments and cultural contexts influence pracademic opportunities in international cooperation settings. María del Carmen Zenck and José Daniel Merchán's analysis of Ecuador's higher education system provides insights into how legal and institutional frameworks can support meaningful university–community engagement. Their work is complemented by Karolina Kluczewska's candid

examination of early career challenges in development practice, which highlights the temporal and structural tensions between academic and development sector work.

The final section showcases concrete contributions and impacts of pracademic work across various contexts. Inés Pousadela's examination of feminist pracademics in Latin America shows how pracademic work can advance both scholarly understanding and social movements, particularly in contexts where academic work is inherently political. The collective autoethnography by Lisa Denney and colleagues reveals the potential of team-based pracademic work, offering insights into how collaborative approaches can enhance development practice.

Disciplinary and geographic scope

The contributions to this special issue span a remarkable range of disciplines, each offering unique insights into the pracademic experience – from development studies to agricultural economics and women's and gender studies.

The geographic diversity of the contributions reveals valuable insights into how pracademic work is conceptualised and carried out across different contexts. While some contributions take a more expansive, transnational approach, the majority explore how pracademics operate within national settings characterised by specific cultural patterns and historical experiences. Lu and Peng focus on mainland China and Hong Kong, while Zantsi and Lungwana focus on South Africa, and Zenck and Merchán consider Ecuador. Kluczewska reflects on development work in post-Soviet Tajikistan, while Pousadela looks at feminist pracademics in four countries of Latin America's Southern Cone.

Some authors, including Kuhn, and Eggert and Sadriu, compare pracademic work across different contexts. Several authors engage explicitly with Global North–South dynamics, drawing attention to Indigenous and local knowledge systems and highlighting how pracademics must navigate complex power relations and cultural differences.

Varying geographic scopes appear linked to different methodological choices, with nationally focused studies tending to offer more detailed institutional analysis and broader geographic studies more likely to offer theoretical insights about navigating different cultural and institutional contexts.

The contributions collectively demonstrate that pracademics must navigate not only between academic and practical spheres but also across geographic and cultural contexts, each presenting its own challenges and opportunities.

Methodological diversity and innovation

The collected contributions reveal a rich array of qualitative approaches, with autoethnography emerging as the most prevalent method. Autoethnographic approaches enable researchers to critically examine their own roles and identities and the challenges of being simultaneously practitioners and academics, helping reveal systemic patterns and deepen theoretical understanding of pracademic work.

Kluczewska draws from her experiences as an early career pracademic researcher in Tajikistan to explore the complexities of international development work. Elbers' reflection focuses on his long-term collaboration with the Liliane Foundation, a Dutch CSO working to improve the wellbeing of children with disabilities across various countries in the Global South. By analysing personal notes, meeting documents, and project reports, Elbers analyses his own roles and contributions.

Gartner reflects on transitioning between practitioner and academic roles in philanthropic studies, while Noh provides a first-person account of her experiences as a transnational pracademic, drawing from her work as an academic researcher with a civil society background based in an Australian University and collaborating closely with Korean development practitioners and activists. She

acknowledges the non-generalisable nature of her narrative while arguing for its potential to deepen sociocultural understanding.

Three contributions employ collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2016), adding an additional layer of analysis through mutual reflection (Axelby, Worku-Dix, and Crewe 2022). Lu and Peng document their experiences of becoming pracademics in China's nonprofit sector, while Eggert and Sadriu explore Muslim pracademic experiences, introducing a faith-sensitive, intersectional framework that challenges the prevailing focus on white, secular pracademics from the Global North. Lastly, Denney and colleagues undertake a collective autoethnography – a collective process of structured reflection and critical engagement with practice – by a ten-member pracademic group over two and a half years, including team workshops and regular reflection sessions.

Case studies represent another significant methodological approach. Zantsi and Lungwana's case study is built around the experience of a single individual pracademic, Wandile Sihlobo. Kuhn develops two case studies, deliberately selected from different cultural and geographical contexts to enhance comparative understanding into typical benefits, challenges, and dilemmas in the area of international cooperation, including one that explores his own experience as a professor at Xiamen University and a senior expert in German international cooperation in China.

Zenck Huerta and Merchán develop exploratory case studies evaluating three engagement programs with multiple data sources, including interviews and document analysis, seeking to understand institutional frameworks supporting pracademic work in Ecuadorian higher education. Lastly, Pousadela combines a literature review with key informant interviews and a life history approach, producing an analysis of feminist pracademic experiences across four South American countries, with a strong focus on interactions between activism and academia.

This methodological diversity reflects pracademic research as an emerging field characterised by experimentation and innovation. The approaches share a commitment to reflexivity rather than traditional notions of objectivity, recognising researchers' positionality as integral to understanding pracademic experiences. However, this does not compromise rigour, as demonstrated by Denney et al.'s use of triangulation with peers and partners. This aligns with established practitioner research methods in fields such as nursing and social work, where they support practitioners in making sense of their work and critically engaging with everyday practice (Fook 2011; Lunt and Shaw 2017; McCormack 2009) to generate both "practice-based evidence" and "evidence-based practice" (Hagen and Tangaere 2023; Nicolls 2014). The authors position this as an inductive and exploratory approach appropriate for the preliminary phases of theory building on pracademia.

Concepts and definitions

The articles in this special issue advance our understanding of pracademia through diverse yet complementary conceptual frameworks. While there is broad agreement that pracademics bridge academic and practical spheres, the articles offer nuanced perspectives on how this bridging manifests across different contexts and roles.

A distinction emerges between articles that view pracademia primarily as an individual identity versus those that emphasise its collective or relational nature. From Kuhn's perspective, pracademics can operate either as individuals simultaneously inhabiting multiple roles or through collaborative ventures spanning institutional boundaries. In contrast, Denney and colleagues reject the notion of pracademics as individuals switching between roles and instead present a collective model where teams work together at the intersection of academia and practice.

Several contributions emphasise the dynamic nature of the pracademic identity. Gartner conceptualises pracademia as a "space between" traditional roles, viewing it as a fluid state of professional being. Similarly, Kluczewska, writing from an early career perspective, describes pracademia as a dynamic approach involving fluid movement between roles.

The ideas of "brokering" and "boundary-spanning" appear frequently but are interpreted differently across contributions. Zantsi and Lungwana focus on pracademics as knowledge brokers who translate academic concepts for wider audiences, while Eggert and Sadriu introduce the concept of "double brokers" who navigate between not only the academic and practical domains but also between faith-based and secular contexts. This expansion to include cultural and religious dimensions represents a significant theoretical contribution.

Several articles explicitly link the pracademic identity to social change objectives. Moxley, for instance, emphasises the advancement of practice as pracademics' principal focus. Pousadela's examination of feminist pracademics in turn shows how academic work can integrate with activist commitments – and how even some academic undertakings can be viewed as a form of activism.

Some authors make unique conceptual contributions by examining specific dimensions of pracademic work. Noh's discussion of a "third space" beyond the academic-professional binary offers a novel way to conceptualise pracademic identity. Elbers' detailed analysis of pracademic roles provides a practical framework for understanding how pracademics contribute to social change through specific responsibilities and functions.

The contributions also reveal interesting tensions. While some authors emphasise the importance of maintaining distinct academic and practical identities to effectively bridge different worlds, others argue for a more integrated understanding where these identities are fundamentally inseparable. This reflects broader debates about the nature of knowledge production and application in social change contexts.

Cultural dimensions receive attention in several articles. Notably, Eggert and Sadriu's examination of Muslim pracademics highlights how pracademic work is shaped by cultural and religious identities, challenging Western-centric understandings of pracademia.

Collectively, these articles demonstrate that pracademia involves complex processes of translation, mediation, and transformation. Whether conceived as an individual identity, a collective practice or an institutional arrangement, pracademic work requires careful navigation of multiple professional, cultural, and institutional contexts. The various conceptual frameworks presented suggest that pracademia's complexity requires multiple theoretical lenses to be fully understood.

Pracademic roles

The articles offer insights into how pracademic roles manifest in practice. Elbers provides perhaps the most systematic analysis, identifying the five distinct roles mentioned above: theory-to-practice mediator, diplomat, empathetic listener, communicator, and critical friend.

This framework finds echoes in other contributions, though with varying emphases. For instance, Zantsi and Lungwana's study of Sihlobo's work in South Africa exemplifies how some of these roles manifest in practice, emphasising the function of translating complex academic concepts into accessible public communications while maintaining credibility. Pousadela's examination of feminist pracademics also emphasises their roles as educators, mentors, and agents of institutional transformation, working to create new academic spaces while maintaining vital connections to activist movements.

Community engagement emerges as a central aspect of pracademic roles. Moxley emphasises pracademics' role in facilitating university involvement in local communities, while Zenck Huerta and Merchán highlight their function in building bridges between academic institutions and communities. From this perspective, they are seen as potential catalysts for meaningful community–university partnerships.

The evolution of pracademic roles over time emerges as a significant theme. Lu and Peng's study of early career pracademics in China shows how roles develop through experience, while Noh's reflection demonstrates how these roles can evolve through active engagement in development practices and activism.

The tension between different aspects of pracademic roles is also a recurring theme. Many contributions note the challenges of balancing academic credibility with practical effectiveness, maintaining multiple professional identities, and meeting diverse stakeholder expectations. However, they also suggest that this tension can be productive, enabling pracademics to create unique value through their boundary-spanning position.

The challenges of being a pracademic

Beyond the conceptual and role-related complexities discussed above, numerous contributions reveal fundamental challenges faced by pracademics. While some challenges are context-specific, several common themes emerge that suggest fundamental tensions inherent to pracademic work.

The sustainability of pracademic work emerges as a primary concern. Kuhn's analysis highlights how funding limitations and short-term contracts make it difficult to build long-term professional trajectories, while Denney et al.'s discussion of project-based funding demonstrates how financial precarity hampers sustained engagement. This appears to be a systemic issue affecting practitioners across different geographical and institutional contexts.

Temporal misalignments create significant tensions. Academic research typically requires extended timeframes, while development organisations often operate on shorter, project-based cycles. As noted by Kluczewska and Kuhn, among others, this can make it difficult to produce outputs that satisfy both academic and practical requirements. Time management and workload issues are further exacerbated by bureaucratic requirements, with Zenck Huerta and Merchán pointing to excessive administrative demands as a significant barrier to effective engagement.

Recognition and legitimacy also emerge as persistent challenges. Despite growing acceptance of pracademic work, pracademics still struggle to gain full recognition for their contributions. Research universities prioritise traditional academic output measurements such as rankings and publications, which often conflict with community-focused work.

Identity and positionality are also linked to crucial challenges. Denney et al. raise important questions about power dynamics when predominantly white researchers work with non-white and Indigenous organisations. This theme is further developed in Eggert and Sadriu's examination of Muslim pracademics, who face additional scrutiny and must strategically navigate their religious identity within secular academic spaces. Pousadela notes feminist pracademics are particularly undervalued within traditional, male-dominated academic hierarchies. These contributions highlight how personal and cultural identities can create additional layers of difficulty in pracademic work.

For good or bad, political and institutional constraints can fundamentally shape pracademic opportunities. Kuhn's case studies demonstrate how shifting political landscapes can abruptly impact pracademic work, while Lu and Peng highlight the specific constraints of working within China's highly regulated nonprofit sector.

Several contributions also highlight a number of emotional and personal challenges that are often overlooked. Gartner's analysis points to the isolation that may result from operating between multiple professional spaces.

Institutional contexts

Several contributions reveal how different institutional frameworks fundamentally shape pracademic possibilities. Some examine how national regulatory frameworks create distinct conditions for pracademic work. Lu and Peng's analysis of China's nonprofit sector shows how government regulations and limited institutional support constrain pracademics, while Zenck Huerta and Merchán's study of Ecuador's higher education system highlights that national legislation can actively support pracademic engagement by mandating university involvement in community development. These contrasting examples highlight how different political priorities and regulatory frameworks may create different opportunities for pracademic work.

Universities emerge as particularly significant institutional actors. Moxley examines how universities are positioning themselves in times of social change, while Pousadela shows how feminist pracademics have transformed academic institutions by establishing women's and gender studies as a legitimate field. Denney et al.'s experience at La Trobe University illustrates how academic institutional arrangements influence pracademic work, with their hybrid funding model requiring navigation of different institutional expectations but also enabling some operational autonomy.

Multiple institutional affiliations create both opportunities and challenges. Zantsi and Lungwana, for instance, show pracademics must navigate between academic institutions, government bodies and industry organisations, and highlight the complexity of tackling different institutional logics and managing diverging expectations.

The potential for institutional transformation receives varying assessments. Elbers shows long-term pracademic engagement can transform organisational approaches to development work, while Kluczewska highlights persistent tensions between academic institutions and donor-funded CSOs. These contrasting experiences suggest that institutional change through pracademic work is possible but often challenging and time-consuming.

Put together, these contributions view institutional contexts not merely as background elements but as fundamental shapers of pracademic possibilities. Variations across national, cultural, and organisational contexts suggest there is no single model for successful institutional engagement, but rather a need for context-specific approaches that work within local institutional realities while pushing for necessary changes.

Contributions and impact

This special issue's contributions reveal several distinct areas where pracademics create value through their unique positioning between the academic and practical spheres. Community engagement and development emerge as a crucial area. Moxley identifies four specific ways pracademics impact community development: facilitating university involvement in local communities, supporting needs assessment and asset identification, developing quality-of-life initiatives, and serving as community advocates. Pracademics can indeed leverage institutional resources while maintaining community-driven approaches, essentially motivating powerful institutions to support bottom-up initiatives.

Innovation in methodology and practice represents another key contribution. Kluczewska shows how pracademics, and particularly early career researchers, can develop more ethical research approaches. Eggert and Sadriu show they can challenge dominant narratives and facilitate cross-cultural understanding, and Noh shows they can defy established knowledge hierarchies. They all conclude that in doing so, pracademics contribute to more inclusive, accountable, effective, and sustainable development practices.

Policy influence represents a significant area of impact. Sihlobo's work in agricultural economics exemplifies how pracademics can shape policy decisions by combining academic expertise with practical knowledge. Similar examples across different contexts, including from the women's rights movement in Latin America, suggest pracademics play a crucial role in informing evidence-based policymaking.

Collective approaches to pracademia show promise. Denney and colleagues conclude that team-based practice can enhance both impact and sustainability while providing crucial professional support to practitioners. Their experience in promoting locally led development is proof that collective approaches can address multiple challenges simultaneously.

As shown by Elbers, organisational learning and capacity building are another important contribution, because of their potential to extend impact well beyond immediate project implementation.

Perhaps most significantly, many articles suggest that pracademic contributions extend beyond both traditional academic and practical impacts. Instead, they create new forms of knowledge and practice that would be impossible without their unique positioning bridging otherwise separate

spheres. This generative aspect of pracademic work, while often challenging to measure, may represent its most fundamental contribution.

Future directions

This special issue does more than document the current state of pracademia; it charts a path forward for both research and institutional reform. The authors collectively argue for a more holistic, contextually sensitive, and socially engaged approach to knowledge production. In their analysis, pracademics emerge not as marginal figures, but as key agents of change capable of addressing complex societal challenges through innovative, collaborative, and reflexive practices.

Future research should prioritise a systematic examination of the institutional arrangements that enable pracademic work. The contributions collected here reveal the complex challenges pracademics face, particularly in navigating divergent institutional and stakeholders' expectations. A more nuanced understanding is needed of how pracademics negotiate multiple professional spaces, each with its own distinct expectations, timeframes, and measures of success.

To mitigate existing challenges, academic institutions should be more intentional in creating supportive environments that recognise the unique value of pracademic contributions and allow for a better balance between academic and practical outputs, including by helping bridge the fundamental divide between traditional academic metrics of success such as peer-reviewed publications and development organisations' practical imperatives. More inclusive and flexible organisation structures could result from collaborative governance frameworks in which pracademics take part in co-design processes.

A critical area for further exploration is the development of more nuanced frameworks for understanding pracademic identities. Our collected articles show that these identities are shaped by multiple factors including cultural context, institutional settings, personal characteristics, and career stage. Particular attention should be paid to pracademic experiences in Global South contexts, which offer rich insights into the complexities of knowledge production and social change.

Methodological approaches should also be refined. The prevalence of autoethnographic and reflexive methodologies in this collection suggests both potential and limitations of current research methods. Innovative approaches are needed to capture the dynamic, iterative nature of pracademic work. This includes exploring collaborative research methodologies that centre local knowledge and diverse perspectives, particularly those that challenge traditional academic research paradigms. It is also worth exploring academic pragmatism as a way of approaching theory through its practical expression – the observable consequences of actions – with each enriching the other.

Intersectionality emerges as a crucial lens for future pracademic research. Special issue contributions highlight how factors such as religion, gender, nationality, and cultural background fundamentally shape pracademic experiences. Future studies should further investigate how intersectional identities influence knowledge production, particularly in transnational and cross-cultural contexts. This includes examining how pracademics navigate between different knowledge domains, including academic, practical, and activist spaces. Comparative studies across geographic regions could provide insights into how intersectional challenges vary and what adaptive strategies are most effective. By deepening the focus on intersectionality, pracademic research can foster more inclusive and representative development practices.

Collective pracademic approaches also hold promise. Team-based and collaborative work can help address systemic challenges and result in the production of more impactful knowledge. Future research should explore models of collaborative pracademic engagement that can sustain meaningful relationships and create lasting institutional change. Critically, this includes addressing the significant institutional barriers faced by early career pracademics, which include limited recognition, career uncertainty, and the complex challenge of establishing professional credibility across multiple domains.

Future research should also prioritise understanding the conditions for sustainable scaling of pracademic work. This includes investigating the role of collaborative networks, resource-sharing mechanisms and adaptive governance structures in extending the impact of localised interventions to systemic change. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how pracademic-led initiatives sustain their momentum and adapt to evolving contexts over time. Additionally, replicable strategies and potential pitfalls could be identified through case studies of successfully scaled pracademic projects.

Lastly, future research should prioritise understanding how pracademic work unfolds in Global South contexts, where regulatory frameworks, funding constraints and cultural dynamics shape unique opportunities and challenges. Comparative studies examining pracademic practices across regions could help produce strategies for navigating these diverse landscapes. Ultimately, the future of pracademic research lies in continuing to unpack these complexities, supporting innovative approaches to knowledge production, recognising the value of pracademic work, and enabling pracademics to play a series of roles that will only become more crucial as global challenges continue to mount.

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