

# **Critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education**

Editorial by Trine Fosslund, Laura Louise Sarauw, and Emily Danvers

## **Abstract**

*This paper sets the stage for an examination of ‘critiquing the sacred and profane in higher education,’ outlining the motivation for exploring collective contribution to the field of higher education studies. Specifically, this paper states that the taken-for-granted concepts that frame academic praxis serve as conceptual lenses to critically evaluate how the academy’s principles and practices are formed and reconstructed over time and across contexts. Paying attention to what is considered sacred (and by whom) and, conversely, what is considered profane reveals a story of what and who is valued and the histories, discourse, and power relations that inform these differential notions of ‘sacredness’. The articles within this special issue collectively illuminate the inherent ambiguity of academic concepts, showcasing their diverse interpretations and the significant implications these hold for higher education practices across different contexts, inviting readers to engage with the complexities and nuances that shape the field.*

*Keywords: sacred, profane, higher education, critical thinking, dualisms*

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## **Introduction: Critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education**

In contemporary academia, terms such as ‘collaboration,’ ‘collegiality,’ and ‘student’s voice’ are frequently considered part of the sacred vocabulary, whereas ‘managerialism,’ ‘performativity,’ and ‘student-as-consumer’ are often disparagingly associated with being profane. These valorisations and degradations are not immutable; they undergo continuous and frequently imperceptible transformations, alongside the fundamental values and principles that shape our everyday existence as scholars and learners within higher education. Consequently, these terms warrant meticulous scrutiny and discourse.

This special issue focuses on the dichotomy of the sacred and profane within higher education. It explores how these terms serve as conceptual lenses for the critical examination of the evolution of discourses, practices, and their foundational values. By employing the metaphors of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ to present these fluctuating values and power relations, the contributions in this collection challenge readers to contemplate the intricate fabric of higher education and to examine the symbolic and transformative forces that contour its landscape.

Macfarlane (2022) contends that the valued vocabularies of contemporary academia have transformed in tandem with evolving ideas and assumptions regarding the purpose of higher education. For instance, dichotomies such as ‘old’ versus ‘new’ universities or ‘traditional’ versus ‘non-traditional’ students exemplify how everyday language can oversimplify complex ideas, intricate concepts, identities, and histories, thereby reinforcing specific presuppositions about the nature or expectations of universities or learners. In this special issue, we invite further exploration into how the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ are embedded within everyday language as a potential—and not always desirable—reinforcement of discourses or power dynamics. For example, denoting something as either sacred or profane creates a restrictive perspective on what is deemed significant or valuable within a discipline, institution, or in the wider academic sphere.

The contributions in this special issue dissect the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ as historically contingent, contextual, and subject to dispute yet endowed with a symbolic nature that sometimes elicits a sense of untouchability and enigma. This language moulds and remoulds our comprehension of higher education across various facets, including knowledge creation, culture, governance, pedagogy, and student identities. Spanning these facets, the contributions beckon us to reflect on the burgeoning tensions as specific concepts evolve and accrue new meanings and power relations in their wake. Crucially, the contributions presented here eschew the binary narrative that posits entities as exclusively one thing or the other. Instead, they encourage us to acknowledge the complexity of how sacred/profane concepts are intertwined and mutually implicated.

### **Languages, policy, and dichotomies in higher education: A critical examination**

In the realm of higher education, the critical examination of language is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary inquiry into the dynamic interplay of semantics and power. The contributions within this special issue compel us to consider the fluidity of language and meaning, which are perpetually shaped by the power structures inherent in contemporary academia.

The invocation of metaphors such as ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ facilitates an analysis of cultural dichotomies across temporal landscapes. These metaphors serve as tools to discern the fluidity with which concepts once deemed ‘profane’ may ascend to ‘sacred’ status and vice versa. This oscillation underscores the historical and ongoing contestation over the definition of the university’s role, the valuation of academic pursuits, and the frameworks that underpin pedagogical and cultural contexts for both students and educators. However, the binary nature of these metaphors risks oversimplification, portraying phenomena as diametrically

opposed when, in fact, the essence of higher education is characterised by complexity and nuance (Macfarlane, 2015). By acknowledging the social, material, and discursive milieus from which concepts arise, we grasp that ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ are relative terms, invariably defined in relation to other entities and shaped by both linguistic and material forces.

The conceptualisation of the sacred and profane within the social sciences and education is a well-trodden intellectual path. A central theme in the literature is the delineation of the sacred as a social and moral cohesive force, while the profane encompasses the secular or mundane. Historical virtues, such as the notion of ‘ivory towers,’ have transmuted into vices, whereas erstwhile vices, like ‘sponsorism’ (Goodlad, 1995), have been recast as virtuous in certain milieus. Terminology within the academy has evolved, reflecting shifts in attitudes, traditions, and expectations. For instance, the term ‘student experience’ has transitioned to ‘student engagement,’ and ‘learning and teaching’ has since emerged as a prevalent catchphrase (Macfarlane, 2022).

The works of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber laid the groundwork for this discourse, and in the subsequent century, scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Basil Bernstein have furthered the exploration of these terms. Beck (2002) has delved into the language and discourse of higher education, applying the sacred-profane dichotomy to analyse the power dynamics that shape official pedagogic identities. By juxtaposing tradition and authority (sacred) with the everyday (profane), Beck examines the contemporary struggles within higher education, such as the evolution of teaching debates in the U.S. and the implementation of a national curriculum in England. Beck’s analysis reveals how language and discourse not only shape pedagogic identities but also maintain them, often at the expense of alternative perspectives. Beck advocates for a critical approach to language to challenge and transform these identities toward a more inclusive and democratic educational paradigm. Righetti (2014) categorises the breadth of research on the sacred and profane into two primary strands: one focusing on the moral and social cohesion attributed to the sacred, and the other examining the interplay between the sacred, power, and contemporary theories. Additionally, this research showed how these debates are interdisciplinary and play out across disciplines—from sociology to neuroscience.

Bernstein’s contributions to higher education scholarship are particularly salient for elucidating how marketisation and managerialism have forged new relationships with knowledge. He posited that ‘secular’ conceptions have ‘divorced knowledge from inwardness,’ thereby altering the previously sacred relationship between the self and knowledge (Bernstein, 2000, p. 86). Bernstein’s Durkheimian perspective raises questions about the shifting language constructs and the binaries they create, which can illuminate practices and relations of power. This line of inquiry has been expanded by scholars such as Becher and Trowler (2001), who

describe the tribes and territories within higher education, where distinct cultures and subjectivities are cultivated, often within disciplinary confines, each with its own set of values, pedagogies, and, crucially, distinctive, and sacred concepts.

The collective insights of these scholars underscore that conceptions of the sacred and profane are inextricably linked to, and evolve with, university cultures, practices, and relations. The contributions to this special issue elucidate this scholarly history further, showing how the language we value, and employ can significantly impact our educational practices and the knowledge domains that permeate our daily activities within higher education. These linguistic shifts are not unidirectional mandates from above, but rather multifaceted and complex processes without a singular origin or terminus, involving all university stakeholders. The articles in this issue demonstrate that these linguistic trends are emblematic of the evolving. The issue invites a critical reflection on the sacred and profane undercurrents shaping higher education and academic cultures.

### **The interplay of the sacred-profane dichotomy in higher education**

In the concluding segment of this editorial, we delve into the affective dimensions that underpin the sacred and profane within higher education, illuminating the intricate normative configurations that these conceptual frameworks reveal. The affective attachments to certain concepts and practices within academia are not merely intellectual positions but are imbued with emotional significance. These attachments are differential and contingent, reflecting the diverse experiences and perspectives of those who inhabit the university space. For instance, managerialism may be vilified as emblematic of the ills plaguing higher education, yet it simultaneously fosters the creation of an ‘intellectual vocabulary’ that allows us to articulate resistance, elevating such discourse to a sacred status. Conversely, the notion of criticality may be venerated as a sacrosanct value of academic pedagogy and intellectual engagement, yet its application can be co-opted as a strategic tool for marketing or assessment, devoid of contextual sensitivity or acknowledgement of the diverse embodiments of those who enact it (Danvers, 2019). Thus, educational concepts do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by cultural connotations and affective associations that vary across contexts (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020).

Drawing from Ahmed (2004), we recognise that concepts can be laden with affect, making some stickier than others. This stickiness influences how concepts are valued and the connections and attachments they engender. For example, Mellis (2019) investigates the construction of student identity in relation to sacred and profane knowledge within various disciplines. In midwifery training, practice is revered as a sacred pedagogy, yet it is also intertwined with the profane institutional

strategy of employability. Here, practice—often contrasted with theory in other disciplines—assumes a near-mystical status where intuition and affect are integral to knowledge production. The sacredness of intuition in the act of childbirth becomes a defining element of the student midwife's identity, even as it is produced in relation to, and sometimes in opposition to, theoretical knowledge. Mellis' findings underscore that the sacred and profane are not only mediated through affect but are also context dependent.

This perspective resonates with McNamara's (2008) examination of nursing education, which explores how the sacred is invoked to legitimise disciplinary discourses, positioning academic nursing as a sacred pursuit to counter the perception of its profane presence in the academy as a practice-oriented discipline. Each discipline harbours its own sacred and profane domains, with language that perpetuates economic, social, and symbolic power structures. In midwifery, for instance, the phrase 'woman-centred care' epitomises a sacred expression that stands in philosophical opposition to a medicalised model of practice in higher education. These examples underscore the significance of this special issue in analysing how concepts in higher education are produced within various spaces and bodies, each carrying distinct meanings and attachments. The forthcoming contributions will provide a detailed contextual illustration of the contested sacred and profane that shape academic praxis and their differential valuation across spaces and through diverse bodies.

### **Synthesis of contributions: Navigating the sacred and profane in higher education**

This special issue of the *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education* collates a series of original research articles from an international array of scholars, representing a diverse collection of disciplinary and methodological approaches. The contributions traverse the historical development of the sacred and profane within the higher education landscape, probing their evolving interpretations. Some articles delve into the practical implications and processes of meaning-making as manifested in policy statements and academic literature, while others critically analyse the language of everyday academic practices, revealing the organisational ambivalence where the sacred and profane are actualised.

The issue opens with a conversation with Professor Bruce Macfarlane, who discusses the interplay between the sacred and profane in higher education. Macfarlane critiques the reductive nature of dualisms such as deep versus surface learning, which he argues simplifies complex constructs and perpetuates fixed notions of university learning and learners. Through the conversation, he observes how certain terms and ideas achieve a sanctified status within the academic sphere,

such as the concept of deep learning or the citation of esteemed scholars, which may inadvertently constrain intellectual exploration and critical inquiry. Macfarlane emphasises the importance of challenging entrenched assumptions and critically engaging with the often-unquestioned ideas and concepts within the academic domain.

The second contribution, penned by Lise Degn, Johanne Grøndahl Glavind, Philipp Pechmann, and Simon Fuglsang, titled ‘Challenging the Profanity of Management in Higher Education,’ confronts the depiction of management and managerialism as profane elements that purportedly erode the sanctity of self-regulating academic institutions and diminish traditional academic values. The authors differentiate between ‘discursively profane’ management, which encounters broad resistance, and ‘practically profane’ management practices, which are deemed unethical. Utilising data from a Danish Delphi study on perceptions of quality in higher education, the authors challenge the view that management is inherently profane, advocating for a more nuanced comprehension of these concepts.

The third contribution, by Ronald Barnett, is titled ‘Can we Please Stop Talking About ‘Bildung’—and for that Matter, too, ‘the Humboldtian University’?’. Barnett critiques the sacralisation of these terms within higher education studies, suggesting that their veneration has spawned an intellectual industry that safeguards specific academic interests and stifles the generation of innovative educational concepts suited to the complexities of the modern era. Barnett calls for an epistemological shift to break free from the enchantment of these terms and to foster new educational paradigms.

The fourth contribution, by Vincent Olsen-Reeder, is titled ‘Tapu-gogy: Confining Profane Pedagogy to a New Sacredness Beyond the Educator’s Reach’. Olsen-Reeder examines the concept of *tapu* in Māori culture and its implications for pedagogical practice. The author questions whether pandemic-induced teaching adaptations have compromised the sacredness of knowledge transmission in Māori pedagogy, reducing it to mere educational performance. The article advocates for the recognition of the sacredness of expertise in Māori culture and a recommitment to praxis decisions made by field experts, contextualising these concerns within the lived experience of a Māori language teacher in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

The fifth and final article, by Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen and Jon Auring Grimm, titled ‘Laure and Bataille as Educators: On the Useless Value of Sacred Experiences’, delves into the application of the sacred and profane dichotomy within the context of higher education writing pedagogy. The authors posit that an engagement with the sacred in writing can catalyse authentic learning and academic growth. They argue for the necessity of disrupting the conventional and profane structures of university writing pedagogy to facilitate experiences of genuine communication for students. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of

Laure and Georges Bataille, the paper employs their nuanced understanding of the sacred and profane to propose innovative and forward-thinking writing pedagogies. This exploration extends to the pedagogical practices of supervision, examination, and feedback on student writing, all viewed through the prism of the sacred and profane. Ultimately, the paper presents a novel perspective on language and discourse in higher education, advocating for pedagogical alternatives that promise to enrich student learning and scholarly development.

Collectively, the contributions within this special issue navigate the enactment of the sacred and profane as metaphors for discerning the valuation of concepts within higher education, a process influenced by specific contextual, affective, socio-cultural, and material forces. These articles reveal the inherent ambiguity of academic concepts, which are subject to diverse interpretations and carry implications for higher education practices across various strata. As readers, you will be confronted with the reality that multiple interpretations of what constitutes the sacred and profane can coexist and even be leveraged as instruments of political power to stifle dissent. This language is shaping higher education, emphasising the need for reflexivity and questioning the tacit assumptions that inform our constructed realities. This issue invites critical reflections on the sacred and profane undercurrents shaping higher education and academic cultures, underscoring the importance of an awareness of the unexamined assumptions that silently permeate ideas within higher education.

The multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the concepts discussed in this special issue underscores their varied interpretations across different contexts, temporal moments, and educational practices. The contributions encourage us to embrace uncertainty and complexity as integral to intellectual praxis and as a constructive framework for engaging with the fluid discourses that characterize the contemporary landscape of higher education. The cultivation of such critical consciousness is posited as increasingly vital in an era where academic discourse is continuously evolving towards metaphors of 'sacred' and 'profane,' following fluctuating values and power relations. In this light, this special issue stands as a demonstration of the importance of ongoing critical inquiry and the interrogation of what we often uncritically accept as the foundational pillars of our academic endeavours.

## **Author biographies**

*Trine Fosslund* is a Professor of Higher Education at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, and Professor II at DMMH. She leads the research group 'Researching higher education' and has developed and leads the UIT development program in research supervision and teaches diverse courses within higher education. She was previously deputy chair of the Norwegian network for University Pedagogic (2009-2019) and a member of several national expert groups on digitalization and quality in higher education. Her research is focused on research supervision, quality in higher education, academic development, and digitalisation in higher education.

*Laura Louise Sarauw* is an Associate Professor at Roskilde University. Her research centers on the policy-practice nexus in higher education and the interplay between governance, metrics, and the lived experiences of management, students, and teachers. With a keen focus on the European Bologna process and related Danish reforms, her research is a major contribution to the understanding of ongoing transformations in the purposes and practices of higher education today.

*Emily Danvers* is a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Sussex and Course Leader of the PGCert in Higher Education. Her current research interests are around everyday exclusions faced in higher education, specifically on how disadvantaged groups experience exclusion beyond the level of access and in the everyday, e.g., via pedagogies, practices, policies, relationships, and assessment. This includes specific projects on critical thinking, academic writing, GRTSB inclusion, widening participation, and feminist theory.



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