

A commentary between worlds: A collaborative autoethnography of practitioner-academic journeys in small island developing states and island territories.

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Abstract: As practitioners increasingly pursue doctoral research in ocean governance, understanding the challenges they face at the academic-practitioner interface becomes essential for strengthening policy-relevant scholarship. This paper examines how practitioners from or engaged with Small Island Developing States (SIDS) experience the transition into doctoral research, identifying structural tensions that influence their journeys. Using collaborative autoethnography, five practitioner-academics document critical experiences during and following their PhDs and collectively analyse recurring patterns across different institutions, contexts, and career stages. Author positionalities include SIDS nationals, researchers embedded in island governments, and professionals with long-term SIDS engagement. Six tensions emerge: (1) professional experience being dismissed unless formally cited; (2) academic debates feeling disconnected from the political realities that practitioners navigate; (3) questions of authority and legitimacy when producing knowledge about underrepresented regions; (4) the cognitive labour of code-switching between practitioner and scholarly epistemologies; (5) a critique of expectations conflicting with community accountability; and (6) invisible work including caregiving and emotional labour that shapes but remains unacknowledged in research. Such findings matter for marine policy: transdisciplinary ocean research increasingly depends on practitioners who bring essential knowledge of negotiations, implementation, and community realities. The tensions identified are structural rather than personal, arising from basic contrasts in how practitioner and academic communities validate knowledge. The paper offers practical guidance to those navigating doctoral studies and recommendations to institutions seeking to support them, contributing to more inclusive approaches in policy-engaged ocean research.

Keywords: practitioner-academic; doctoral research; ocean governance; Small Island Developing States; autoethnography; professional identity

Introduction

Practitioners entering academia face distinct challenges in navigating the interplay between abstract scholarly norms and the richness of practitioner knowledge. Such challenges become even more pronounced when their work engages regions and communities historically positioned as subjects rather than authors of research. The practitioner-academic gap has been debated for decades and emerged with several solutions from “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven, 2007), to the knowledge brokers and boundary spanners the literature recommends as bridges between worlds (Ward, House & Hamer, 2009; Long, Cunningham & Braithwaite, 2013), to the co-production frameworks promising equal partnership (Graham & Tetroe, 2007), to the research–practice partnerships designed to align academic and practical concerns (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). These solutions assume the gap is fundamentally about communication, translation, or incentive structures. Despite this growing body of work, accounts of the practitioner-academic journey remain sparse in ocean governance specifically, and are almost entirely absent where SIDS contexts are concerned. This paper addresses that gap directly, offering accounts from within the SIDS ocean governance space that the literature has not yet captured.

There is growing recognition that tackling ocean governance and sustainability requires research linked to policy and practice (Wisz et al., 2020; Haas et al., 2022; Strand et al., 2022). There is, therefore, value in examining how practitioners experience the transition into doctoral research, including the tensions, adaptations, and insights that emerge as they navigate academic norms alongside professional identities in the context of SIDS and island territories. In acknowledging these transitions, we also recognise that they take place within contemporary evaluative cultures influenced by audit practices and metrics-based forms of governance (Strathern, 2000; Burrows, 2012; Mountz et al., 2015), even as practitioners work through more adaptive and time-sensitive modes of practice that respond to changing political dynamics and real-time policy needs. These contrasting logics form part of the wider landscape in which practitioner-academic journeys unfold. This paper provides an honest reflection on the tensions that shaped the journeys and the lessons learned. It further aims to support practitioners considering doctoral research, those already navigating these pathways, and the supervisors and institutions that structure doctoral training.

Ocean governance research presents particular intensifications of these tensions. The field operates at the intersection of multilateral negotiations, regional agreements, and national policy processes, spaces where practitioners with deep expertise increasingly pursue doctoral research examining the very processes in which they are professionally engaged. Academic systems reward thoroughness; practitioner instincts recognise that timing can matter more than completeness. Practitioners and policymakers proceed with imperfect knowledge, monitoring implementation and adjusting policy, while academic systems demand more certainty before publication. A dynamic practitioner-academic must navigate tensions when their work intersects with live political processes. We suspect these reflections may be particular to policy-engaged fields; whether similar tensions emerge elsewhere would require further investigation. For those straddling both worlds, this means continually weighing research design decisions against the ethical and practical implications of producing scholarship that intersects with live political processes, while holding space for both rigour and responsiveness.

The tensions documented here sit within a broader tradition of scholarship on epistemic injustice that helps explain why the practitioner-academic tensions outlined are not merely individual or institutional; they reflect systematic inequalities in whose knowledge is recognized, valued and seen as credible. Fricker's foundational work identifies two forms

particularly relevant to practitioner-academics from SIDS: testimonial injustice, where a speaker's credibility is deflated due to identity prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where gaps in collective interpretive resources place someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their own experience (Fricker, 2007). Both dynamics are present when practitioner knowledge is systematically discounted unless translated into academic forms, and when the very experience of navigating two knowledge systems has no established vocabulary within either. Island studies scholarship offers a further and more specific framing. Scholars have examined how island knowledge is routinely treated as locally bounded, that is to say, interesting as context, but not generalisable, not theoretical, not portable (Baldacchino, 2008; Hay, 2006; McCall, 1994). McCall's concept of nissology insists on islands as legitimate sites of knowledge production in their own right rather than peripheral cases of continental frameworks. These arguments map directly onto the experiences documented here by illustrating tensions through which practitioner knowledge from island contexts is produced within governance practice yet often marginalised within academic knowledge regimes.

Who are we?

Angelique Pouponneau is a Seychellois lawyer, negotiator on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT). During her doctorate at the University of Malta, she simultaneously served as an advisor to the Chair of AOSIS, occupying dual roles as diplomatic representative and scholarly researcher of SIDS ocean governance.

Dominique Benzaken is a French-Australian ocean governance and policy expert who commenced her PhD at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) following decades of international practice focused on islands, including two years embedded in the Seychelles government to support the development of their blue economy strategy.

Frédérique Fardin is an interdisciplinary ocean researcher from Martinique working on marine conservation, fisheries and equity. Trained across ecology, environmental management and geography, she started her career through regional practice before pursuing doctoral research at the University of Cambridge, in affiliation with UNEP-WCMC; and now postdoctoral work on vulnerability and adaptation in tropical social-ecological coastal systems.

Kahlil Hassanali is a Caribbean ocean governance practitioner who employed Action Research methodology while serving as lead negotiator for the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) on environmental impact assessment during the negotiations for the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement).

Kelly Hoareau is an environmental professional who spent eleven years helping to establish and strengthen ocean governance programs and research institutions in Seychelles before returning to academia to embark on doctoral study. As a South African of European descent working in SIDS contexts, she navigated being simultaneously insider and outsider, while also balancing motherhood and professional responsibilities.

Drawing on collaborative autoethnography, this paper explores the experiences of five practitioners either from or professionally engaged with SIDS and island territories as they navigate the tensions between practitioner expertise and academic expectations. Collaborative autoethnography is a research approach in which multiple researchers share personal narratives and collectively interpret their pooled experiences (Lahelma et al., 2006; Clerke & Hopwood, 2014). During and after completing their doctoral research, the authors documented critical

incidents and engaged in reflective conversations about their doctoral journeys. Each author documented their experiences individually. These accounts were first synthesised by one author and subsequently reviewed by all authors. This was followed by a collaborative analysis and dialogue to identify emerging themes and recurrent patterns across our different contexts, institutions, and career stages.

Our positionalities locate us within this science-policy-practice interface. Angelique and Kahlil maintained active practitioner roles throughout doctoral study, experiencing simultaneous demands from both worlds. Kahlil negotiated the BBNJ Agreement while researching CARICOM's engagement; a duality not incidental but integral to his journey. Angelique advised AOSIS on ocean governance while pursuing doctoral research on SIDS legal frameworks, finding herself advising government ministers on approaches she was simultaneously critiquing in journal articles. Dominique commenced her PhD at the end of her career, seeking consolidation and transmission of lessons learnt working with small islands and in particular her two years embedded in the Seychelles government blue economy policy processes both as an advisor/observer and participant in a complex and highly political process. Returning to academia after an extended period in applied and leadership roles, Kelly navigated the challenge of re-entering academic knowledge practices while carrying deeply embedded practitioner ways of knowing, translating experiential, relational and time-sensitive insights into forms recognised and rewarded within doctoral research. Frédérique similarly entered doctoral study after a period of applied regional work, during which she built networks and long-term relationships that later grounded her academic research. Her positionality carries an additional complexity: as a Martinican scholar, she navigates spaces where her island is sometimes treated as a SIDS in regional forums, yet remains governed as a French department. This produces ambiguities around belonging, representation (Martinique is not a full member of the CARICOM or the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States), as well as around the expected direction of knowledge flows. These challenges persist across markedly different positionalities, pointing to the influence of exclusionary academic practices that prioritise certain ways of knowing, revealing the tensions this creates for practitioners and highlighting why these insights matter for shaping more inclusive and context-sensitive ocean research practices.

As practitioners and individuals with long-standing ties to SIDS, we wrote from an insider perspective that informed both our access to knowledge and our accountability to the communities and institutions involved, providing access to tacit, relational and place-based knowledge rarely captured in formal documentation. This may strengthen our interpretation, but also introduces vulnerabilities such as community accountability in small, interconnected settings and the visibility of speaking critically in small island contexts. At other times, our roles as researchers in external institutions positioned us as outsiders, offering analytical distance and enhanced credibility within academic systems, but also raising concerns about misinterpretation or inadvertently reproducing historical biases towards island-produced knowledge. These shifting insider-outsider positions are not incidental, but central to the practitioner-academic tensions examined in this paper and to the epistemic questions it raises about whose knowledge is recognised and on what terms.

Methods

All five co-authors completed their doctoral research within the last five years. In the twelve months preceding this work, they engaged in informal conversations reflecting on their experiences, which were selectively and situationally documented through reflections exchanged in the margins of conferences, over meals, and in professional settings where the

practitioner-academic tension was experienced. Upon agreeing to write this paper, each author then composed their individual autoethnography independently, writing cathartically and without a prescribed structure, drawing on those accumulated experiences. The resulting accounts were shared across the group, and common themes were identified through collective reading and dialogue, distinguishing what resonated broadly from what required tailoring to be legible beyond individual contexts. Not all themes that emerged were carried forward. Several tensions surfaced in one or two narratives. However, they did not recur with sufficient consistency across the group to be treated as shared structural features. These were set aside not because they lacked significance, but because collaborative autoethnography can only responsibly claim what is genuinely collective. Where accounts diverged, that divergence was itself treated as meaningful: rather than resolving differences into a single narrative, variation was retained within tensions where it illuminated how positionality, career stage, or institutional context shaped the same underlying dynamic differently. We acknowledged that the themes we identified may not represent all practitioner-academic experiences. Our interpretations were subjective and situated, arising from memory, dialogue and synthesis. Different insights might have emerged with another group or at a different stage of our journeys. These limitations underline the contextual and interpretive nature of our approach.

Other themes, including publication politics as a form of resistance, the unequal capacity to afford critique depending on one's professional safety net, and the more fundamental question of whether Western academic knowledge production is the right model for SIDS communities, emerged strongly within individual accounts. However, these issues pointed toward a distinct and broader line of inquiry that extended beyond the collective focus of the present study. While analytically significant, they did not recur across narratives in ways that allowed them to be examined here with sufficient depth or care without diluting the collective focus of this study. These threads will therefore be taken up in forthcoming work on knowledge production in SIDS contexts, where they can receive the sustained attention and conceptual development they warrant.

Tensions that shaped our journeys

Through our collective experiences, six tensions were identified. Individual voices are woven throughout this commentary.

Experience as evidence

There is great appeal in drawing practitioners to the world of academia, but the same practical experience is repositioned as a challenge from the start of the doctoral journey. This is especially the case in SIDS and island territories, where the practitioner is frequently the only repository of knowledge that exists nowhere in the academic literature.

Although recruited in the PhD programme because of my professional expertise, I had to argue and provide tangible evidence that my two-year experience in Seychelles was a legitimate source of data and knowledge, even if not collected through commonly understood empirical methods - Dominique

Key insights into ocean governance and sustainable ocean economies in SIDS are often embedded in policy practice, institutional processes, and local knowledge systems, rather than documented in academic literature. Angelique was the CEO of the SeyCCAT and, in that capacity, was responsible for some of the implementation of the government's ocean governance and blue economy policies, and an advisor to the AOSIS Chair. Yet she could not cite her own knowledge as authoritative. She found herself searching for journal articles that documented what she already knew experientially, confronting absurd choices: Should she give

her knowledge to another researcher so they could write it, then cite them about the things she had done?

The ritual humiliation of searching for permission to know what I already knew
– Angelique

Kahlil's experience was different. His research examined the BBNJ Agreement negotiations, but he was not studying them from an external position. He was leading CARICOM's negotiating position on environmental impact assessment. Early on in his doctoral journey, he was challenged to consider his objectivity and if/how he could mitigate biases. An action research approach provided a way to recognise this experience as methodologically legitimate, rather than dismissing it as biased.

Fortunately, my doctoral supervisors were very supportive of me leaning into my privileged position. But I was not given free rein academically as I was forced to find a way to maintain rigour. Reconciling the two in a way that satisfied all parties involved was the real challenge – Kahlil

Kelly related to this tension in her own doctoral context, seeking approaches that acknowledged her professional experience as legitimate knowledge rather than framing it as bias, while grappling with the sense that her knowledge did not fully align with academic expectations. In Seychelles, she had operated with limited data, relying on adaptive management and precautionary principles, balanced with intuitively guided risk grounded in accumulated professional experience and contextual understanding. Knowledge was generated through practice, dialogue, and collaboration rather than formalised academic processes. Working across disciplines, including science, policy, community engagement, and institutional systems, she frequently found herself knowing considerable amounts about many things, but not deeply enough in any single area to feel she truly belonged in academia.

This created a sense of vulnerability, especially in academic environments that value depth and specialisation. It was a constant negotiation: integrating multiple perspectives while experiencing pressure to demonstrate sufficient expertise in something specific, never quite feeling expert enough in anything – Kelly

Academic debates and political realities

Academic debates often provide useful theoretical tools, but they can also feel disconnected from practical experience. Angelique became aware of this during her PhD when she encountered scholarly arguments about which countries should be classified as SIDS. In academic settings, researchers debated population sizes, levels of development, and whether various countries met strict criteria. This tendency to sort the world into neat categories felt far removed from what she knew from practice. At the same time, she was participating in meetings of AOSIS, where governments with political legitimacy self-identified as SIDS and were recognised as such in global negotiations. In these spaces, SIDS identity functioned as a political and relational reality rather than a technical classification.

This mattered for her academic work because her research focused on SIDS. She was expected to adopt the conceptual clarity valued in academia, yet her practitioner background showed her that SIDS identity was formed through politics, self-identification, and collective recognition. The tension arose from trying to reconcile these two ways of understanding the world, a challenge that many practitioners face when entering academic research.

I found myself superficially engaging with this literature because I couldn't reconcile the academic exercise with the political reality. There were many moments when an

internal tug of war made academic pursuits seem like rabbit holes with little relevance to the work happening on the ground – Angelique

A similar tension emerged around debates on the blue economy. In her professional experience, Angelique had seen Seychelles intentionally avoid pinning down a fixed definition of the term, yet this lack of precision did not prevent meaningful policy development or practical work from moving forward.

Both academics and policymakers love definitions. Naming is powerful. In the case of my area of study, ocean governance and the blue economy, naming is a minefield which in the end does not adequately represent a range of blue economy realities – Dominique

This contrasted sharply with academic expectations for clear, stable definitions and quantitative ways of categorisation, and again highlighted how, in practice, progress can be driven by shared intent and political negotiation rather than by strict conceptual boundaries.

In my work, some on my advisory committee were encouraging me to create a way to, in essence, rank the ‘blue-ness’ of different observed blue economy structures. However, for me, it was enough to anecdotally show that the concept had taken different forms in practice. I did not want to go down the road of scoring or ranking as it was of little applied benefit in my contexts – Kahlil

In SIDS contexts, academics from far away places develop critiques, categorisations and labels that may have real-life consequences. Whether a country qualifies as a SIDS determines eligibility for climate financing, development funding, and negotiating coalitions; consequences that make the academic definitional debate feel not merely disconnected from political reality, but actively dangerous to it.

Both Angelique and Dominique eventually chose to use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as their analytical frame, since all states had endorsed them and their legitimacy required far less justification than alternative concepts. They reached this point by very different paths. For Dominique, the SDGs offered a practical and widely accepted tool that allowed her to focus on solving the problem at hand. For Angelique, the decision came only after grappling with a deeper unease. She felt that some academic debates placed scholars in the position of deciding how entire populations should be classified or understood, even though these scholars were not answerable to the people whose identities and political realities their definitions affected.

Questions of authority, extraction and legitimacy

Working on ocean governance in contexts marked by rapid change, long histories of marginalisation, or ambitious policy innovation brings difficult questions to the surface. Who is recognised as an expert? Whose interpretations carry weight in scholarly and policy discussions? For practitioner-academics from SIDS and island territories, these questions become even more complex. Studying other island contexts can feel like an act of solidarity, yet it can also risk reproducing the same extractive dynamics that the literature often critiques.

Angelique felt this tension acutely when analysing legal frameworks in Belize and Fiji alongside her native Seychelles. Her discomfort pointed to a wider asymmetry in global knowledge production. Knowledge grounded in Western intellectual traditions is often treated as universally portable, allowing those who work within these systems to speak authoritatively about contexts they have only briefly encountered. Their expertise circulates globally, gaining legitimacy far beyond the extent of their lived experience or connection to the places they describe. In contrast, knowledge emerging from developing world contexts, often grounded in

lived experience and long-standing engagement with place, is frequently framed as locally specific rather than universally relevant. Scholars drawing on these traditions are often positioned as sources of contextual information rather than recognised as theorists whose work could shape broader debates. This reflects not a geographic divide, but a hierarchy in which some ways of knowing are assumed to travel easily, while others are kept in place (Mignolo, 2009).

I had many moments of discomfort. I learned about Belize and Fiji with great humility – both small island developing States, but we are not all the same. I questioned my every assumption as I examined their laws through my eyes. I could not understand how people do this guilt-free – Angelique

Frédérique grappled with similar questions when her doctoral research took her to Southeast Asia alongside the Caribbean. The contrast clarified something important about the relationship between knowledge and place:

I felt, viscerally, the difference between doing research in a context where I had been a practitioner and where I had not: for the former it was less about extracting insight and more about sustaining a relationship – Frédérique

Her discomfort pointed toward the same asymmetry Angelique identified. Knowledge grounded in Western institutional traditions circulates globally, whilst knowledge emerging from island and postcolonial contexts is frequently framed as locally specific rather than universally relevant.

During my PhD, I kept returning to a simple aspiration: research that returns value locally, resists extractive dynamics, and treats fishers' perceptions and practices as knowledge, not merely material to be processed. Over time, I also became more aware of how easily institutional reward systems can pull attention away from reciprocity – Frédérique

This consciousness created an ongoing negotiation: how to produce scholarship that met academic expectations while refusing to reproduce the extractive dynamics the literature so often critiques.

Much foundational ocean governance scholarship has been produced by researchers from Northern institutions who engaged briefly with SIDS contexts, while nationals who built those governance systems remain uncited. For SIDS practitioner-academics, writing within this literature means navigating a field that has already decided, structurally, what role their knowledge plays.

Dominique, as an international expert in an island policy setting, experienced firsthand the global North-South polarity:

There is an expectation that international expertise will address an expertise or accountability gap...International experts find themselves wearing several hats, as a go-between across the North and South divide, as an island advocate or at times as a convenient external actor in complex island policy settings – Dominique

Kelly also experienced this duality. She was both part of and apart from the work, grounded in long-term relationships and shared commitments across SIDS, while now writing about these contexts as a PhD scholar. This shift created a continual negotiation between her responsibility to the people and places she had worked alongside and the academic practices and expectations that now framed her role. The result was not a tidy resolution, but an ongoing practice of navigating authority, accountability and legitimacy in ways that acknowledged these tensions without pretending they could be fully escaped. Rather than interpreting this as bias, she approached it as a form of reflexive awareness, making deliberate choices about how

to represent the contexts she knew from practice. This meant staying attentive to the responsibilities carried from her earlier work, while also recognising the demands and constraints of the academic system she was now part of.

Even as I began to write, I wrestled with the feeling that this story wasn't entirely mine to tell. It emerged from years of collaborative practice, from relationships, shared experiences, and collective efforts in a place I cared deeply about but didn't originate from – Kelly

Code-switching as cognitive labour

Movement between practitioner and academic worlds requires constant translation, grappling with what counts as valid reasoning, appropriate evidence, and legitimate knowledge claims (Hargreaves, 1996).

Kahlil described skills essential to his research that academic systems literally cannot see: understanding people and group dynamics, the capacity to read a room, discernment regarding when to intervene and when to let something go, and critically, the ability to build and maintain trust. These skills were essential but resistant to the replicability that defines traditional academic rigour, because they rely on lived experience, situational judgement and relational awareness that are difficult to translate into the standardised forms of evidence or formulaic practice academia typically demands. As a result, although these capacities were central to the quality of his work, they remained largely invisible within academic evaluation frameworks.

They cannot be taught through coursework or methodology chapters. They develop through years of practice, through trial and error in high-stakes diplomatic contexts, through building relationships that matter beyond any single research project – Kahlil

Kelly's return to academia was a profound shift in identity. After spending many years working in knowledge- and capacity-poor contexts, she was used to making pragmatic decisions with limited evidence, finding information quickly, and wherever possible prioritising actionable solutions. Re-entering academia after nearly two decades meant adapting to a world that valued theoretical rigour and deep engagement with uncertainty. This contrast was stark: peers appeared academically fluent, while Kelly felt like an outsider relearning norms. The transition revealed tensions between practitioner and scholarly ways of knowing, and raised questions about belonging in both worlds. This shift demanded constant cognitive labour - switching between practitioner pragmatism and academic reflexivity.

I often felt like I was catching up, trying to navigate systems, processes and expectations that others seemed to understand intuitively – Kelly

Frédérique's experience of code-switching extended beyond the practitioner-academic divide into the terrain of disciplinary identity. Having trained in ecology and evolution before moving into geography, she found herself legible to neither community in quite the way she intended. This sense of partial belonging aligns with challenges identified for early-career interdisciplinary marine scientists, including a steep learning curve, the need to learn diverse disciplinary languages, and to work across differing theories, frameworks and approaches, ultimately requiring patience and time and can intensify pressures to remain legible across fields (Andrews et al., 2020).

The 'expert' label functioned as a reduction rather than recognition. Ecosystems are legible; relationships are messy; governance is political; equity makes people uncomfortable.

Being positioned as an expert in something tangible made sense to the majority while obscuring the relational and political work at the heart of her research.

I am always negotiating time: time to stay, time to listen, time to build reciprocity versus time to produce outputs that academia recognises as evidence of productivity – Frédérique

Dominique brought particular insight:

It is about switching brain mode. What matters is being fluent in both, and that can take time and effort and make the difference valued and acceptable – Dominique

This experience highlighted that becoming a practitioner-academic is not simply a matter of learning new skills, but of occupying an in-between space that requires continuous negotiation of identity and epistemic stance. The work involves holding two modes of reasoning in tandem, translating tacit, experience-based judgment into academic forms, and resisting the pull (or push) to abandon one way of knowing in favour of the other. It is not a deficit but a distinct form of expertise, one that brings its own demands and its own contributions. Understanding this duality helps reframe the practitioner-academic journey not as a problem to be overcome, but as a complex, valuable, and often transformative process of moving between worlds. Our experience suggests that the practitioner-academic gap may be less about communication failures and more about navigating genuinely different cognitive modes, although this does not preclude meaningful exchange between the two worlds.

Critique and community accountability

Academia valorises critical approaches: questioning assumptions, deconstructing frameworks, and identifying limitations (Tuhiwai Smith, 2024). For researchers from or working with marginalised communities, this imperative can feel challenging and re-emphasises the power asymmetries that exist. The expectation to critique can sit uneasily when one's work is rooted in responsibility to communities, relationships of trust, and a desire to highlight strengths rather than deficits.

Angelique's PhD documented SIDS achievements: leadership in ocean governance, pioneering blue bonds, and developing innovative financing mechanisms. She wanted to showcase possibility, to celebrate what SIDS had accomplished against enormous odds. But the academic imperative was to identify limitations, weaknesses, and gaps. The critics already had the power, money, and privilege to write. She felt expected to do the same. This raised an additional tension: how to write critically without reproducing external narratives that have historically diminished the agency and achievements of the very communities she sought to honour.

Why should I reinforce their critical perspectives when SIDS stories hadn't even been properly told yet? Was I doing scholarship or advocacy? – Angelique

In small island communities, academic work travels fast and lands personally. A critique of governance published in an international journal may reach its subjects before the author has left the conference where they presented it. The stakes of that circularity are qualitatively different from writing critically about institutions where the researcher has no ongoing accountability.

Frédérique experienced this tension through her positionality as both insider and outsider: Martinican, yet credentialed elsewhere; a practitioner of regional governance now positioned as an academic researcher:

In some contexts, being from the island allows trust to build faster, which undoubtedly helps. I can recognise what is not being said, and I know how long-standing historical relationships with state institutions, researchers, and external actors shape what people feel free to share. But in other contexts, my positionality triggers suspicion, where I can be seen as an outsider by my own people because research is often associated with extractive knowledge practices, unequal power relations, and even sometimes colonial systems that continue to shape local experiences – Frédérique

Dominique confronted an additional layer: her PhD essentially evaluated work she had helped create. The PhD offers opportunities to create distance from the practical work we have conducted and adopt a fresh perspective. How does one maintain critical distance from work in which one invested years? She resolved to frame the research as an opportunity to substantiate with verified evidence some of the blue economy implementation challenges she had encountered, focusing on lessons for improvement rather than critique for its own sake. This approach acknowledged that critique can be generative when grounded in responsibility and care rather than detached assessment.

Invisible labour

The tensions described thus far intersect with personal circumstances that academic discourse rarely acknowledges. Gender, caregiving responsibilities, and life stage influence how practitioner-academics experience their doctoral journeys, yet these dimensions often remain invisible (Manchester et al., 2023). The constant negotiation of identity, responsibility and belonging adds another layer of labour that is seldom recognised as part of academic work.

There's a perception that academic and professional women manage it all seamlessly: parenting, publishing, teaching, networking. But the reality is far more complex. I often felt like I was winging it, improvising, juggling competing demands, and questioning whether I was doing enough or doing it right. That internal tension between the appearance of coping and the reality of constant negotiation was a quiet but persistent part of my experience – Kelly

This is not merely about "work-life balance," a framing that often places responsibility on individuals to manage structural problems. The emotional labour, the invisible work, the constant recalibration that does not appear in methodology chapters or CVs. Yet it shapes how individuals present themselves, what they can contribute, when they can write, and how they generate knowledge. This labour includes managing expectations from both academic and community worlds, holding the weight of representation, and navigating the ethical implications of writing about contexts to which one remains accountable.

Added to this is the emotional toll of representing communities severely impacted by climate change: witnessing ecosystems and species decline through the stories of colleagues and friends, and hearing about moments when children ask why more is not being done. These experiences remain heavy, whether lived or carried, and remain largely unspoken in academic spaces. Yet they profoundly shape how we write, what we prioritise, and the urgency we bring to research. Such emotional entanglements are rarely legible to academic metrics, yet they profoundly influence methodological choices, interpretive stances, and the forms of care embedded in the research process. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that a fully funded PhD can offer rare flexibility. In this space, women with caring responsibilities may find both a recognised career path and an opportunity to reimagine how work and care can coexist.

Taken together, these six tensions do not operate in a vacuum. They are shaped, in each instance, by the particular features of SIDS knowledge contexts that the broader practitioner-academic literature does not account for, such as, relational density that makes critique rarely anonymous; limited research infrastructure that leaves the practitioner-academic frequently alone in the literature on a given issue; colonial knowledge legacies that position SIDS practitioners as sources of local data rather than producers of transferable theory; and the emotional weight of climate vulnerability that Northern academic norms rarely acknowledge, let alone accommodate. It is important to recognise that this is not to claim exceptionalism; it is to insist that the structural differences between SIDS and other knowledge contexts are analytically meaningful, and that accounts of the practitioner-academic divide that do not account for them will remain, at best, incomplete.

Lessons learnt and practical guidance

Our respective motivations for embarking on a doctoral study journey were diverse; collectively, our experiences suggest the 'gap' framing, while useful, may understate the depth of difference between practitioner and academic knowledge systems. The tensions experienced suggest that the gap concerns not only different ways of seeing and building knowledge, but also legitimacy and authority. For us, this was not a simple transition but a transformation process rather than one with clear resolution. More practically, through our respective doctoral journeys, we learned to function with contradictions that did not disappear - to develop new capacities and skills while losing certain forms of ease, to refuse binary framings without finding a comfortable middle ground. Those tensions were not temporary or personal obstacles; they were structural features of practitioner-academic journeys. Recognising them is the first step toward creating spaces where these identities can coexist productively. Additional autoethnographies of doctoral journeys undertaken by practitioners working in SIDS and other ocean governance settings can advance understanding of practitioner-academic tensions and contribute to a growing body of reflexive scholarship that informs how doctoral training supports knowledge production across practice and research.

Drawing on these experiences, the next section reflects on considerations for academic institutions and practitioners navigating doctoral research within SIDS ocean governance and comparable settings.

Recommendations for academic institutions

Academic institutions can better support practitioner-academics by recognising the unique positioning they bring. Practitioner-academics carry years of professional experience that influence how they see and work with knowledge, yet they also face distinct challenges when navigating academic systems. Valuing professional experience as legitimate knowledge is essential, as practitioners contribute insights that institutions cannot produce through traditional research alone. Helping them translate this expertise into academic forms strengthens both scholarship and practice. This also requires calibrating evaluation criteria with awareness of audit cultures and metrics-based governance, which can inadvertently undervalue relational, timely, and contextual forms of rigour. Where possible, institutions should make room in Key Performance Indicators and review processes for practitioner outputs (for example, policy briefs, facilitation, transdisciplinary network cultivation) as legitimate scholarly contributions.

Institutions should also recognise that many practitioner skills, such as reading group dynamics, exercising situational judgement, and building trust, are rigorous forms of expertise even when they do not fit traditional expectations of replicability or methodological detachment. Academic settings can further support those with practical backgrounds by acknowledging the importance of reflexive awareness. People working across both domains often move between long-standing relationships in their professional contexts and the analytical distance expected in academic environments. This does not signify bias, but rather a sophisticated engagement with positionality. Providing environments where this dual cognitive mode is understood and supported can help practitioners navigate these responsibilities with integrity rather than defensiveness.

Institutions can also reduce the isolation that practitioners often experience by connecting them with peers who share similar backgrounds, creating cohorts or informal networks where possible. Such peer communities provide support that neither supervisors nor workplace colleagues can offer because they understand the demands of moving between two worlds.

Acknowledging caregiving realities matters. Many practitioners manage family responsibilities alongside demanding professional roles and academic expectations. Open conversation about constraints, rather than silent endurance, supports well-being and enables stronger academic outcomes. It is also important to recognise that practitioner-academics often carry forms of critique and community responsibility that are not always visible in academic environments.

Institutions should also avoid treating practitioner-academics, especially those from underrepresented regions, as readily available “institutional capacity” for diversity, engagement, or decolonisation work. Because they often have credibility across communities and are skilled at convening, translation, and trust-building, they can be disproportionately asked to lead initiatives, represent marginalised perspectives, or provide emotional and relational labour that supports institutional legitimacy. When this work is valued, it should be resourced, recognised, and clearly bounded; otherwise, institutions risk extracting a different kind of labour that is seen as fast, effective, and unpaid, while leaving underlying structures unchanged.

The work of balancing critical analysis with care for the communities they represent, along with the emotional and ethical labour this involves, often goes unacknowledged yet significantly influences how they write and what they prioritise.

Recommendations for practitioner-academics

For practitioner-academics, it is important to anticipate contradictions and the cognitive labour of navigating two epistemic worlds. This can be exhausting, but it can also be productive. Embrace your practical experience as a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge, especially when academic debates feel disconnected from real-world realities. Make your relational and experiential skills visible, even when academic systems do not immediately recognise them, so that they are understood as legitimate expertise rather than misinterpreted as bias. Select analytical frameworks that allow you to move comfortably between practice and scholarship, and reflect carefully on who is affected by the concepts you use and the claims you make.

Building peer networks early can provide crucial support, as others who share your dual positioning can help you manage tensions that are difficult to articulate within either world alone. Choose supervisors who understand positionality and can help you translate practitioner knowledge without diminishing its value. Allow room for reflexivity and resist the pressure to

force your experience into neat theoretical categories too quickly. In practice, this means looking for supervisors who have themselves worked across practice and scholarship, who cite practitioner knowledge respectfully in their own work, or who have supervised practitioners before. Pragmatism is also a strength; sometimes, the most effective choice is the one that enables the work to proceed.

Practitioner-academics may also feel pressure to “fix” structural problems in academia alongside doctoral expectations. Coming from practitioner spaces, it can feel natural to respond by building initiatives or taking on representational labour to make the institution more just. While meaningful, this work can become an additional, costly burden that is rarely rewarded. Treating the PhD as a learning journey rather than a mandate to solve institutional problems can help protect time and well-being. This is not disengagement; it is a strategy of long-term viability, enabling research contributions to strengthen structures more durably over time.

More broadly, the tensions you encounter are not personal shortcomings, but reflections of the structural differences between practice and academia, and engaging with them thoughtfully can enrich your scholarship and contribute to a more inclusive research culture. Recognising your dual fluency as an asset rather than a liability can support confidence and clarity as you move between these two ways of knowing. From the experience shared, all the authors learned to move between these expectations. It involved converting experience into citable artefacts, presenting judgement as method, and making relational work visible as knowledge work. By doing this, we were translating lived and practice-based insight into forms that academic systems recognise. This brought long-standing practitioner skills into our doctoral programs and gained new academic competencies in return, and learning to use both became valuable in navigating different audiences and ways of working. The development of this skill set, however, depended heavily on research environments that understood the demands of cross-boundary work.

Beyond our own experiences, there are increasing opportunities for innovation emerging across research arenas that intentionally make room for complexity, positionality, and lived forms of expertise. These approaches show that rigorous scholarship can be relational, contextual, and accountable without losing analytical clarity. The challenge arises when such work is undervalued, under-resourced, or confined to isolated programs instead of being supported as part of academic culture. Without sustained recognition and institutional backing, these innovations remain vulnerable despite their importance for policy-engaged research.

Conclusion

This commentary emerged from a collaborative autoethnographic process in which five practitioner-academics from diverse backgrounds, spanning ocean governance, international negotiations, environmental education, and policy development across SIDS, documented and collectively analysed their doctoral journeys. Despite differences in geography, institutional context, and career stage, six common tensions recurred: the paradox of experience as evidence, where professional expertise is simultaneously valued and delegitimised; the disconnect between academic debates and political realities practitioners navigate daily; questions of authority, extraction, and legitimacy that complicate knowledge production about underrepresented regions and non-sovereign territories; the cognitive labour of code-switching between practitioner and scholarly epistemologies; the challenge of maintaining community accountability while meeting academic expectations for critique; and the invisible labour of caregiving, emotional weight, and personal circumstances that shape research but remain unacknowledged.

Ocean governance and transdisciplinary sustainability research particularly intensify these challenges, given the field's intersection with live policy processes, multilateral negotiations, and communities experiencing urgent environmental change. As practitioners increasingly pursue doctoral study in these domains, institutions and supervisors must recognise practitioner-academics as a distinct category requiring tailored support rather than adaptation to conventional student pathways.

The similarities in experience suggest that these tensions are structural rather than personal. Our experiences show that practitioner academics work across two infrastructures of credibility. In policy settings, legitimacy is built through trust, timing, and sensitivity to political and relational dynamics. In academic settings, legitimacy is often signalled through citation practices, methodological templates, and a performance of distance intended to support consistency. Neither system is universal; each attends to different risks and responsibilities. Across our cases, these dynamics unfolded within, and were often intensified by, metrics-driven audit cultures that influence what counts as credible research and impact.

This paper does not offer solutions. Rather, we present these reflections to validate the experiences of practitioners navigating similar terrain and to encourage others to document and share their journeys. This study has limitations that warrant acknowledgement. Five authors, drawn from connected professional fields and connected through overlapping networks in ocean governance, cannot represent the full diversity of practitioner-academic experience even within SIDS contexts. Additional autoethnographies may corroborate, complicate, or extend these initial findings. What we can affirm is that the challenges practitioners encounter in academic spaces are not deficiencies to overcome but structural features of inhabiting multiple knowledge systems, and that the perspectives, skills, and relational knowledge practitioners bring are not peripheral; they are contributions that academia needs. Future work might examine how evaluative infrastructures and audit cultures influence practitioner-academic pathways across fields and regions, informed by further autoethnographic work.

From us, each path differs; what we share is the experience of navigating between worlds that operate by different rules, value different things, and often fail to recognise each other's contributions. We have learned to work within it, against it, and through it simultaneously.

Welcome to the depths. The water's cold, the pressure is real, but the work matters. And there are others down here with you – All.

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