'I am a single mum. I don't feel like I can be as competitive as other people':
experiences of precariously employed staff at UK universities

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ABSTRACT

Universities play a central role in informational capitalism. However, higher education institutions have undergone economic, political and cultural transformations leading to competition, market orientation and new management forms. These changes have effects on many levels, including the working conditions and practices of individuals involved in the information gaining process. This article aims to find out how the existing working conditions and practices at universities form the meanings, identities and experiences of individuals by focusing on precariously employed academics. I address this question based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with casualised academic staff.

KEY WORDS

academic labour, universities, information work, precarious work, casualisation, informational capitalism

Introduction

The economic and political transformations of universities in recent decades have attracted criticism from several quarters. This is also reflected in a growing academic literature investigating these changes in the context of neoliberalism and the rise in the interweaving of private and public providers. Within universities, a new entrepreneurial and managerial spirit has been carefully fostered and produced that has resulted in the implementation of market-driven rules and competition (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007). It is argued that educational institutions nowadays aim to respond to market demands whereby the public character of education tends to fade away (Peters, 2003).

Critical scholars speak about 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999), the 'corporate university' (Giroux, 2002) and 'Uber.edu' (Hall, 2016). These structural transformations have had several impacts on the working conditions, practices and relations of subjects including, to name but a few, the intensification and extension of work, the blurring of work and free time, casualisation, precariousness, self-exploitation and self-marketing. How these conditions are experienced by different subjects is open to debate. While the experiences of work in other sectors such as the cultural and creative industries are well documented, there is still a lack of understanding of labouring subjectivities in academia, as well as a lack of analysis of how the existing conditions are experienced by academics (Gill, 2014:12–13).

This article strives to find answers to the following question: How are the existing working conditions and practices at universities perceived and experienced by precariously employed academics?

I address this question based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with casualised academic staff at higher education institutions in Scotland. In particular, some theoretical foundations of the study of academic labour are outlined in the next section. The following section presents the methodology of the empirical research that was conducted. Then, some findings of the study are presented and discussed in relation to job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. The article concludes with a summary and a discussion of the further implications of the study.

Theoretical foundations

In this section, I will outline some theoretical foundations of the study of academic labour: in particular, job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. Among others, these are important dimensions that shape the working conditions at higher education institutions. For a systematic model of the working conditions at universities, see Allmer (2017).

Job insecurity

Employment in higher education is characterised by a tendency of casualisation and temporality. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2016), 128,300 permanent/open-ended and 70,035 fixed-term academic staff worked at universities in the UK in the academic year 2014–15. On top of that, there were 75,560 academic atypical staff in the same year. Adding up those on a fixed-term contract with the academic atypical staff means that the majority (53.2%) of academic staff work on a temporary basis in UK higher education. Casualisation allows the university to test the performance of the academic, strengthens 'Darwinian selection', reduces labour costs and gives the opportunity to respond quickly to changes on the education market to deal with low and high peaks of demand (Bryson & Barnes, 2000:193). The number of staff needed also depends on how successful a university is in terms of marketing and attracting students for the upcoming academic year. Universities compete with each other in a market for potential new students. Casualisation of academic staff can therefore be considered as one of the outcomes of applying quasi-market, neoliberal rules at higher education institutions:

The university could never be sure about enrolments size or profitability; it had to remain forever poised to take action, to stimulate enrolment, to cut costs, to keep growing. The permanent flexibility this required meant that the staff had to be proletarianised and stratified into temporary part-time workers, permanent teachers and permanent researchers. (Shumar, 1995:94)

Pratt (1997) highlighted that employing part-time and fixed-term staff at universities had become a management strategy. Twenty years since this pioneering analysis was carried out, those working at a pre-1992 university are now typically on research-only contracts, work part-time, have less than five years work experience, are female and are under the age of 40. Additionally, non-white and non-UK staff are most likely to be on temporary contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

Temporary contracts tend to have an impact on the employee's economic security and control, exclusion from the department, relationship with other colleagues and lack of opportunity for career development and promotion (Bryson & Barnes, 2000:217). Gulli (2009:5) highlights that the expansion of temporary staff is typical for the neoliberal discourse as it brings flexibility to the university at the cost of individual insecurity that can lead to anxiety, disruption, stigmatisation and loss of dignity. A contradiction between inclusion and exclusion characterises the employment of temporary staff. Temporary staff are much needed and included in economic terms, but tend to be invisible and exposed and therefore excluded in social and political terms. Tirelli (1999) has therefore stressed that casual contracts trigger labour segmentations within the academic workforce leading to increased hierarchies and potential for conflict. Neoliberal universities tend to decrease the number of relatively established and respected permanent staff and increase the number of relatively powerless temporary staff. This does not, however, imply that only temporary staff are affected by neoliberal conditions, but rather that casualisation runs throughout academia. From a trade union point of view, casualisation also brings political changes that advantage the management and weaken the academic workforce. 'Faced with a restive mass of immaterial labour, a university administrator's best strategy – backed by centuries of academic hierarchy – is to ensure that regular and contingent faculty remains divided' (Dyer-Witheford, 2005:78).

Workload
Drawing an analogy with the idea of the 'factory without walls' (Dyer-Witheford, 1999:80) from Autonomist Marxism, Gill (2010) argues that the neoliberal university can be considered as 'academia without walls'. Autonomist Marxism claims that capital tends to subsume the whole of society into the production process and the logic of the factory is thereby extended to the whole of society (Wright, 2002:37–38). Society functions as a moment of production, where the border between working and spare time becomes more and more blurred both spatially and temporally (Gorz, 2010:22). Just as the larger social factory is a factory without walls, neoliberal universities have intensified work in terms of time and extended it in terms of space with the help of digital technologies. Academics tend to have fluid boundaries between their working space and other spaces of human life and their labour and free time (Ross, 2000:23).

Always-on cultures have transformed the university to a 'fast academia'. 'Ever speeded-up mobile technologies intermesh seamlessly with the psychic habitus and dispositions of the neoliberal academic subject: checking, monitoring, downloading whether from BL (British Library), beach or bed, trying desperately to keep up and "stay on top"' (Gill, 2010:237).

This theoretical assumption can be underpinned with empirical data. The University and College Union has conducted several online surveys of workload and work-related stress among its members in the UK (Court & Kinman, 2009; Kinman & Wray, 2013; University and College Union, 2014; University and College Union, 2016). In 2014 (n = 6,439), 79% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they found their job stressful. And 53% indicated that their general or average level of stress was high or very high. Almost half (48%) responded that they experienced unacceptable levels of stress often or always (University and College Union, 2014:1–2). According to the 2016 survey (n = 12,113), academic staff worked an average of more than the full-time equivalent of 50 hours per week. Especially among early career academics, a culture of long working hours was prevalent (University and College Union, 2016:18). Factors contributing to stress in higher education included, among others, the lack of time to undertake research, excessive workloads, problems in obtaining funding, lack of promotion opportunities and job insecurity (Court and Kinman, 2009:61). Academics regularly work evenings and weekends to cope with the high demands of their job (Gill, 2010:235) and do not take their full entitlement of annual leave (Crang, 2007:510).

Management

A 'new managerialism' has been implemented in higher education institutions in recent decades. New managerialism can be understood as the adoption of organisational forms, technologies, managerial control practices and ideologies from private business that are applied to public sector organisations such as universities (Deem et al., 2007:24–28). Under neoliberal and post-Fordist conditions, UK universities are becoming increasingly corporately managed. Academic functions are thereby broken up into controllable processes (Lorenz, 2012:610) leading to a fracturing of professional profiles. The private sector style of management brings into being a hierarchical organisational structure, division and standardisation of work, narrow specialisation and routinisation of tasks to increase accountability and measurement by management. Prichard & Willmott (1997) pointed out that universities were implementing many elements of 'soft managerialism': urging academics to meet performance targets and thereby encouraging self-discipline without the need for 'hard management'. As a result of the pressure to meet performance objectives, individual resources for actively participating in the decision-making process on the institutional and school level are becoming scarce:

> *Yet, in effect, increased managerialism implies that the input of staff into decision-making is degraded from collegial participation to, at best, a consultative role in which staff willingly accept and support their heads of department who then managerialize the process through which resources are won and allocated. (Willmott, 1995:996)*

Tancred-Sheriff (1985:384) compared the decision-making process at universities with a 'kiddie steering wheel in daddy's car' with heaps of relatively powerless committees and panels, despite formal decision-making powers. More than 20 years ago, Prichard & Willmott (1997) conducted 36 interviews with senior post holders such as vice-chancellors, deans, heads of school and heads of department at four UK universities about their understanding of managerialism. The authors reported that their interviewees 'talked of the implementation of strategic initiatives, of managing staff, of taking responsibility and even of being a small-businessman' (Prichard & Willmott, 1997:313). Miller (1991:111) argued that vice-chancellors tended to act like chief executives.

Control mechanism

Although procedures of surveillance, monitoring and audit cultures are not new control mechanisms within universities (e.g. the Research Assessment Exercise has been in place since the 1980s), nor is the university the only or the most extreme place of surveillance, such procedures have been taking hold significantly at higher education institutions in the UK for some years now (Burrows, 2012:357). Metrics operate at different stages, such as the institutional, national and international level, but all of them must be confronted by the individual academic (Burrows, 2012:359). An elaborate set of monitoring procedures and metrics exists at universities, including grant income, citation scores, workload models, transparent costing data, research 'excellence', student evaluation, employability scores, impact factors and commercial university league tables (De Angelis & Harvie, 2009:11–14). Burrows (2012:359) identifies that British academics are now subject to more than 100 different scales and indices. Academics are measured individually against other colleagues as well as grouped and measured against other groups to assess and rank academic values. Gill (2014:22–24) argues that surveillance culture and audit regimes lead to a new psyche and structures of feeling at universities that include individual pressure, anxiety and threats. The proliferation of league tables triggered a culture of naming and shaming that results in self-surveillance:

> *Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitutes academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which not being successful […] is misrecognised […] in terms of individual (moral) failure. (Gill, 2010:240)*

Mental and physical health

Several empirical studies have investigated mental and physical health issues at higher education institutions. In a survey of the University and College Union (2014:2), 60% of the respondents showed evidence of some level of psychological distress. According to Watts & Robertson (2011), the burnout level among teaching staff at universities is comparable with 'at risk' groups such as health care professionals. The psychological distress of academics exceeds many other professional groups and is caused by factors such as high level of conflict between work and private life (Kinman & Wray, 2013:6). Academic and academic-related work tends to 'spill over into the home domain both physically (e.g. working at home during evenings and weekends), and psychologically

(e.g. preoccupation with work problems, difficulties in sleeping, and irritability with family and friends)' (Kinman & Wray, 2013:7).

Gender

Among other characteristics such as class, ethnicity, age and disability, gender plays a part in shaping the experiences of academic workers. Altogether, there are 273,895 academics (part- and full-time academic staff and academic atypical staff) in UK higher education. Overall, 37% of full-time academic staff have salaries between £43,325 and £58,172. Higher proportions of male full-time academic staff (25.3%) have salaries of £58,172 or over than female full-time academic staff (13.9%). The proportion of academic females is 45.0%. For full-time academic staff, the proportion of females is 40.0% and for part-time, it is 55.1%. Around 47.2% of the academic atypical staff population are women. In addition, the higher the position in the hierarchy, the fewer women can be found in higher education. For example, 56.2% of students in the UK are female but only 23.1% of the professors are women (all data for the academic year 2014/2015: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

Methodology

This article draws on a small case study in which I conducted ten semi-structured, face-to-face, qualitative interviews with academics. The focus was on people who were employed 'atypically', such as on a fixed-term contract, a casual contract, an hourly paid basis or a zero-hours contract at higher education institutions. The participants were chosen from nine different universities (five pre-1992, four post-1992) across Scotland, using a quota sampling strategy (Lune & Berg, 2017:39). The variables used to establish the quotas included gender, educational level, higher education institution, terms of employment and age. The interviewees were found through university websites, had no personal relationship to the interviewer and were approached directly via email. The interviews took place in offices, university rooms and cafes in 2016. After individual consent was obtained, the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Participants had the freedom to withdraw at any stage during the interview. All data were stored securely, treated confidentially and anonymously. The interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. A copy of the transcript was sent to the participants for further comments and final approval. The scripts were analysed with the help of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Lune & Berg, 2017) and to find answers to my questions about how academics perceive their existing working conditions to be shaped by political and economic contexts.

   The socio-demographic profiles of the respondents are given in Table 1.

   Several authors have already conducted empirical work in this context (e.g. Prichard & Willmott, 1997; Deem et al., 2007; Archer, 2008; Norkus, Besio & Baur, 2016). My study aimed to add to this body of knowledge by focusing on academics who are employed precariously at higher education institutions using an in-depth analysis of meanings, identities and experiences of individuals that favours a qualitative, instead of a quantitative approach (Gray, 2004:22).

Table 1: Socio-demographic profiles of the respondents

Gender	Six women, four men
Citizenship	Seven British, one German, one Austrian, one Belgian
Educational level	Ten doctoral degrees
Job description	One teaching fellow, eight (postdoctoral) research fellows/ (postdoctoral) researchers/research associates, one lecturer
Subject area	One education, one politics, two social studies/sciences, one psychology, two sociology, one informatics, one economics, one health sciences
Higher education institution	Six pre-1992 universities (two Russell Group universities), four post-1992 universities
Mode of employment	Seven full-time, one part-time, two hourly paid
Terms of employment	Nine fixed-term (one currently on leave), one 80% fixed-term/20% open-ended
Age	Youngest 33 years, oldest 56 years, average 42 years

Analysis and interpretation

This section presents and discusses some findings regarding job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. Among other things, these dimensions were discussed in the interviews I conducted. For a structural overview of the interview questionnaire, see Allmer (2018).

Job insecurity

When asked how much they consider job insecurity in their current post, participants mentioned concerns and worries about their insecure situation and reported feelings of precariousness, lack of prospects, increasing competition and need to make multiple job applications. Most of the participants were concerned about the insecure nature of their jobs and aspired to economic security. 'I really wanted a more secure position', claimed Participant 2. This view was echoed by Participant 6 who said that 'I would rather have a permanent position and stop wondering where I will be in five years'. A postdoctoral researcher emphasised that her insecure job situation was depressing, making her feel devalued and affecting her self-esteem. Another female researcher told me that she could not concentrate on her work anymore due to the insecure job situation. The precarious nature of the job worried her and was constantly in her head.

Interviewees also reported feelings of precariousness and described inadequate payment and economic insecurity. A teaching fellow, who was the course organiser of a large programme at his school, told me that teaching fellows are paid on grade seven, although many of them have responsibilities and commitments intended for staff on grade eight, including being a course organiser, lecturer or programme director. He continued by saying that teaching fellows do grade eight work, without receiving

appropriate contracts or salaries (these grades refer to academic roles and profiles at British universities). A young academic mentioned that her previous departments wanted her to fulfil tasks without getting paid:

> The other departments I had been working for were still wanting me to do lectures and marking but weren't going to pay me. There came a point where I said 'no'. 'No, I am not doing this anymore'. They interviewed me for a teaching fellow job, didn't give me the job, but still wanted me to do the odd lecture and the marking for it […] but not even offering me the hourly pay. (Participant 2)

One hourly paid lecturer had two other jobs in addition to her main one to have some financial security and to be able to work within higher education. She described her plans to write journal articles during the unpaid summer holiday to make her more appealing in the academic job market. Interviewees also claimed that preparation time for teaching was not adequately compensated within their pay. Interviewees described being confronted with a lack of knowledge, confusing information and a lack of prospects in their jobs. A teaching fellow was confused about his prospects within the institute:

> All through January, February, we were told 'it is looking great, they are going to make everybody permanent, there is a real move to get rid of these temporary contracts' and then they told us the complete opposite. (Participant 1)

A female research fellow said she felt terribly insecure and did not know what would happen after her current grant had finished. An hourly paid lecturer was aware that she would not get any information about contract extension until shortly before the start of the next semester. A contract researcher told me that she felt insecure in terms of not knowing when and where the next contract might come from, not knowing what percentage of a full-time equivalent position she might be able to secure and not knowing when a particular project might start. Interviewees felt driven to be competitive and hard-working at all times by the temporary nature of their work and the related insecurity.

Simultaneously, these respondents were aware of, and worried about, the competitive atmosphere among staff. Interviewees told me that competition and pressure for permanent posts and secure jobs were constantly getting higher, which they found difficult on an individual level.

Participants mentioned their fears and worries of being unemployed and the risk of being made redundant as an academic. A teaching fellow made the case that if student numbers were to drop at his school, fixed-term academics, including him, would be the first to be made redundant. A young researcher described how she had found it really worrying to be unemployed after she had finished her PhD. Many interviewees said that they were constantly screening the job market and applying for new jobs. A fellow at a Russell Group university mentioned that as a fixed-term academic you are constantly looking for something else. 'The longer we are teaching fellows, the less research output we generate so the harder it is to compete with the people who are outside, who are already in lectureship posts' (Participant 1). Others complained that finding a new job was time- and energy-consuming, tiring and humiliating:

> *Oh it is just time wasting. It is tiring. It is […] I don't know if I can say, it is humiliating at the same time […] And if it is not writing applications for jobs, it is also writing applications for projects and I just want to do something else. (Participant 6)*

Participants also described how difficult it was for them to find the time to write job applications and prepare for interviews properly.

Workload

Many participants reported overload in their working environment. A teaching fellow mentioned that he has to write feedback for more than 20 dissertations in addition to a heavy teaching load. He continued by saying that supervising personal tutees was also a major task. Another interviewee told me that working on hourly paid contracts in different departments at the same time was the hardest work she had ever experienced:

> *Because I was trying to work in several different departments, because I didn't have a salary, I was paid by the hour, and I was course coordinating and getting one hour paid for preparation time […] I think that was the hardest I have ever worked. (Participant 2)*

A project researcher was confronted with a high workload in her project and felt particularly pressured because she had to deal with the double load of having a baby and working full-time. An older academic at a post-1992 university told me that people were overloaded and overburdened and tended to be workaholics, but the older she got, the less she was willing to work overtime. A young researcher was aware that he worked 'more than normal' (Participant 6), but considered this to be essential. Another interviewee mentioned that there were highs and lows in terms of workload in her projects, but pointed out that this is hard to control by yourself as a contract researcher. She went on to say that 'you permanently rely on other people'. A lot of the participants complained about work pressure and a high level of stress. As a teaching fellow recounted, a lot of pressure is generated by the fast turnaround time of assignments. He added that it was considered normal to work overtime at the school where he was employed.

Another interviewee recalled a time where she saw some of the students more often than her family and could hardly find time to eat and sleep properly. A contract researcher described how very stressful and pressurised research projects can be, especially at the final stage. Another project researcher contended that principal investigators tend to promise a lot in the proposal which can then lead to a high-pressure working environment for the entire research team. She went on to explain how having different commitments to several projects simultaneously can lead to a very high level of stress. A teaching fellow said that he tried to avoid working at weekends, but this just resulted in long evenings of work during the week; he still had to top things up by working at home from time to time. As another interviewee put it, 'There is no time for weekends' (Participant 2). A young mother recounted how she frequently worked in the evenings, after she had come home from an 8-hour working day.

Several participants shared offices and tended to work in different places, including the office, cafes and from home. While some enjoyed the flexibility, others were

concerned about a blurring between work life and private life. Participants reported difficulties in taking their full entitlement of annual leave because of their heavy workloads. One interviewee had never managed to take all his annual leave and found it hard to get time off at the same time as his partner. Another participant confessed that she did not take any annual leave at all because she felt 'something would suffer' (Participant 2). A contract researcher said that it is difficult to take annual leave if you work on three different projects. There is always at least one that needs you in that particular week:

> It is not easy when you have multiple contracts to try and take annual leave for example […] If you have multiple contracts, there is always going to be one that really needs you to be doing something this week, or next week. (Participant 9)

Management

Respondents were asked for their views about the management at their department. Several mentioned harmful experiences with an authoritarian management style, lack of support from more senior staff and giving up being loyal and ambitious. A female postdoctoral researcher spoke about negative experiences with an authoritarian management style in her previous job. She went on to say that the management brought a lot of bad feeling and negativity and made people leave. A young researcher said she did not feel supported by more senior staff in terms of career progress. Others backed this up by saying that there was a lack of support in their departments, especially when it came to conducting research and career development. Managerialism, hierarchical organisation structures, narrow specialisation and routine tasks led to frustration and anger for these participants. A teaching fellow told me that he did not see the need to be loyal and ambitious anymore, since his contract had not been made permanent:

> They weren't going to renew my contract, I am not really sure anymore how bothered I am about showing that I am super loyal hard working, ever ambitious. (Participant 1)

Similarly, a single mother spoke of her experience of putting a lot of effort into a project without getting any rewards, which resulted in her giving up loyalty entirely.

Control mechanisms

Participants were asked about their experiences in relation to mechanisms to control their performance as an academic. They discussed annual review processes, the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[1] and talked about 'playing the game'. A young academic told me that many people in his department saw the annual performance and development review as a purely managerial activity, an irrelevant exercise that did not mirror their actual work or concerns. Most of the participants had not been submitted to the REF but were familiar with the procedure. A postdoctoral researcher thought

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1 The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an evaluation process that assesses the research of higher education institutions in the UK. With some variations, it takes place every sixth year and is used to decide on the amount of public research funding for individual universities.

that the REF was an unfair and inaccurate mechanism, especially for those who have teaching commitments. A research associate claimed that the REF is biased as it advantages well-known people:

> *If you have already a name, or a reputation, your papers will be more likely to get to the three-four-star journals and therefore you are more likely to attract funding. (Participant 7)*

He also thought that the REF made it unattractive to conduct historical-longitudinal studies and helped to create a tick-box culture. 'Everyone is playing the game here', a young research associate at a Russell Group university told me. He criticised these developments but admitted to also being a part of it. When an older teaching fellow spoke about his experience of talking to young academics, he mentioned that people are aware of the contradictions within higher education, but do not have much hope of political change at the moment which leads to a 'playing the game' culture:

> *People know there are these things going on but at the same time they don't see there is much hope of things changing, so they try to play the game somehow. (Participant 1)*

Mental and physical health

Asked how far the working conditions affected their mental and physical health, interviewees mentioned psychological and emotional distress, narrowed social life, strained work relationships and misrecognition. A research fellow told me that she was constantly tired and snappy and there were times where she could neither sleep nor eat properly because of stress and overwork. She continued by saying that teaching was permanently in her head before going to sleep and she could not get rid of it. Another interviewee also reported that work is always there in the back of her head. Another described how she had experienced stress and exhaustion in the past that had also affected her health conditions. A young research associate at a Russell Group university complained that 'the fact that I am in an insecure position has had an impact on my relationship as well, because I am bitter and I am not the nicest person to live with at the moment' (Participant 6). Another participant claimed to feel better at the office while being worried and stressed when not at work:

> *When I am away […] I am more stressed […] I think about the job more, like, and I am worried that I am away, it worries me […] when I go to the office […] I feel better, then when I do not […] even if I have taken annual leave. (Participant 10)*

Another interviewee, speaking about the final stage of his PhD which he had to write while simultaneously starting to teach at university said 'I did not have a social life, there was no social life' (Participant 10). An hourly paid lecturer described how social life was narrowed down and the suffering that was caused by stress and overload. A young academic from Belgium told me that because of insecurity, temporality and mobility, he did not even register with the National Health Service (NHS). Another participant maintained that she had managed to achieve a relatively good work–life

balance, but that this might have been the reason that she had not achieved a permanent contract:

> *I normally do not work at weekends, I am not a workaholic. I tend to have a good balance between family and job, but that is probably also the reason why I am still on a temporary contract and do not have a permanent role (laughs). (Participant 5)*

An older teaching fellow at a Russell Group university described a situation in his department where there were tensions between staff, where people were divided into different camps and fundamental issues remained unresolved. A contract researcher noted that lecturers, especially those who were newly appointed, tended to treat more junior researchers on their projects in a patronising way, which could lead to tensions and make things difficult. Being precariously employed, obeying hierarchical organisation structures and constantly fulfilling narrow tasks also had an impact on perceptions of identity and recognition of academics. A female research fellow said that it could make you feel narrowed down if you were required to work to a managed timetable and given little autonomy in your work. She continued by saying that it was difficult for a research fellow to be taken seriously. Another interviewee argued that tutorial staff were not only being paid poorly, but were not getting the recognition they deserved either.

Gender

Asked about gender issues, female researchers informed me that academia brought both flexibility and insecurity, particularly for women. Participants recognised gender bias in the job market and argued that it was still harder for women to succeed in higher education. This perception is reinforced by the statistics, which show that the higher up in the hierarchy you look in higher education, the fewer women that can be found with, for example, women making up only 23.1% of professors in the UK in the academic year 2014/2015 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Because women are more likely to be employed precariously within higher education, I conducted the majority of my interviews with female academics, to better reflect the overall picture. The majority of the female interviewees also had child care commitments, which is likely to be related to the young age of the participants, which is further connected to their precarious employment. In the following section, I will present some quotes from those interviews, without suggesting that gender inequality within higher education only affects mothers of young children.

A female research fellow with a 6-month-old baby told me that people are constantly worried that you might take maternity leave. She also heard colleagues talking about the concern that an interviewee might be pregnant:

> *The last interviews that happened here in the department, they were employing three new lecturers, I know that they were concerned with one of them. She came for an interview, that she might be pregnant […] I have heard people talking about that concern. (Participant 4)*

Another female academic made a similar point, saying that as a female contract researcher it is very difficult to get a job at a certain age, because principal investigators

fear that you might become pregnant during the project. A young female researcher asserted that she could not compete, because she had to look after her son as a single parent and thus felt disadvantaged in academia:

> *I am a single mum […] I don't feel like I can be as competitive as other people […]*
> *I do feel at a disadvantage. […] It feels like you are really restricted in what you*
> *can do […] As well it is that insecurity, it is just like a vicious circle because you*
> *are having to keep on these short insecure contracts, because you can't compete*
> *on a level to get something permanent. It is […] it perpetuates. (Participant 8)*

A female lecturer opined that men tend to be better in terms of selling and self-presentation in the academic environment. A young researcher mentioned that she did not feel comfortable raising her voice in a male-dominated research group and thus felt silenced.

Summary

This article has engaged with some theoretical foundations of academic labour and working conditions at universities. It also presented and discussed the findings of the qualitative research in relation to job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. The key findings can be summarised as follows.

Job insecurity

The research confirms the findings of other scholars that there is a tendency of casualisation and temporality of employment in higher education. Temporary contracts tend to have an impact on employees on many levels. Participants in this study mention concerns and worries about their insecure situation and report about precariousness, missing prospects, inadequate payment, increasing competition and job applications.

Workload

These results also confirm earlier research that academics tend to have fluid boundaries between their working space and other spaces of human life and their labour and free time and that always-on cultures have transformed the university to a fast academia. In my study, most respondents reported overload and overburden in their working environment. Some interviewees were also concerned about a blurring between work and private life.

Management

According to the literature, universities are becoming increasingly corporately managed, which is described as 'new managerialism', as a response to the post-Fordist conditions. Academic activities are thereby broken up into controllable processes. This study provides further evidence of this: participants mentioned harmful experiences with an authoritarian management style, lack of support from more senior staff and giving up on being loyal and ambitious. Managerialism, hierarchical organisation structures, narrow specialisation and routine tasks led to frustration and anger for many academics being interviewed.

Control mechanisms

This research also provides further illumination on the way that the metrics operating at the institutional, national and international levels impact on individual academic workers, with respondents describing their negative experiences of annual review processes and the REF and talking about 'playing the game'.

Mental and physical health

The psychological distress of academics exceeds many other professional groups and is caused by factors such as a high level of conflict between work and private life. This is evidenced in this study in interviewees' descriptions of psychological and emotional distress, narrowed social life, strained work relationships and misrecognition.

Gender

Finally, this study confirms earlier findings relating to gender bias in higher education, with female respondents describing the additional challenges they face in the job market and the trade-offs that have to be made to combine work with parenting. While some have chosen academic work because it appears to offer greater flexibility than other forms of work, they have paid a high price for this in insecurity.

Conclusion

Universities play a central role in informational capitalism. However, higher education institutions have undergone economic, political and cultural transformations leading to competition, market orientation and new management forms. These changes have effects on many levels, including working conditions and practices of individuals involved in the information gaining process. This article has aimed to find out how the existing working conditions and practices at universities form the meanings, identities and experiences of individuals by focusing on precariously employed academics. The theoretical foundations and empirical findings suggest that precariously employed academics feel insecure and overworked and experience new forms of managerialism and control mechanisms that impact their mental and physical health. However, when it comes to politics, struggles and alternatives, further questions have to be raised in future research, both theoretically and empirically: What are the broader political realities and potentials in terms of solidarity, participation and democracy at universities? What are the challenges to reclaim the university as a site of struggle? How far can the struggle at universities be connected to broader societal struggles? What do the political potentials of alternatives within and beyond higher education look like? Although those questions were outside the scope of this article, they would help to find strategies to overcome the challenges academics are facing today as analysed here.
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