

PANEL DISCUSSION:

Creating Happiness in the Measured University: Navigating, resisting and re-making discourses of excellence in academic life.

Panel Lead: Dr Martha Caddell, Edinburgh Napier University, UK.

Summary:

In the context of league tables, national student surveys and increasing competition for students and resources, measurement and comparison is an ever present – and ever more fraught – aspect of contemporary academic life. How, then, do academics navigate between institutional drives for 'excellence' and the need to find happiness, meaning and value in their work?

Through this discussion session, participants will critically explore these themes through a structured activity. They will be invited, through the use of a range of art materials, to develop a rich picture of 'happiness in academic life'. This activity will be informed by research vignettes from each paper. These will prompt further development of the pictures and build a critical discussion of happiness, 'excellence' and collegiality in the measured university.

Key prompt questions which guide the discussion and activity are:

- In what ways do university staff create 'happiness', meaning and value in their work and academic roles?
- How does a dominant culture of measurement and 'excellence' impact on everyday academic work, and the balance of competition and collegiality in workplace relationships?
- What are the practical, political and policy implications of adopting a 'happiness' lens to explore academic work?

Detailed Panel Proposal:

Creating Happiness in the Measured University: Navigating, resisting and re-making discourses of excellence in academic life.

[Note to reviewers: We initially approached the development of this panel discussion proposal in a fairly traditional way - and we could easily revert to this if you felt it more appropriate to do so.

However, we propose here creating space to experiment with a more creative way of running a discussion session within the parameters of the SRHE formats. Here we propose an interactive session where research input and discussion is framed around a creative activity to construct a 'happy academic' as a mechanism for exploring how discourses of excellence and the value of academic work are engaged with, resisted and remade in everyday interactions.]

Overview:

Through this interactive session, participants will be invited to construct, through the use of a range of art materials, a rich picture of 'the happy academic'. This active discussion will be informed by a series of research vignettes. Each will challenge and prompt further development of these pictures and build through the session a critical discussion of happiness, 'excellence', and value in the measured university. Research inputs include discussion of journeys into and through 'academic' careers; the search for prestige in the context of programme leadership; transitions into HE careers from industry; and consideration of what recent industrial action reveals about perceptions of the university workplace and work culture.

Thematic Focus

In the context of league tables, national student surveys and increasing competition for students and resources, measurement and comparison is an ever present – and ever more significant – aspect of contemporary academic life (Gourlay & Stevenson 2017, Deem 1998)). Indicators of excellence drive action planning, with particular dimensions of academic work effectively reified as the drive for improve performance in areas that are measured and are therefore perceived to 'matter' and offer institutional and personal prestige (eg Blackmore & Kandiko 2011)

Constant exposure to comparison and pressure to meet targets and goals, be they REF outputs, marking deadlines, or ensure student satisfaction across all aspects of a programme of study means that academic staff have to consider which aspects of their role to prioritise or, indeed, perform. This interlinking of institutional definitions of excellence and success and individual sense of value, career-progression and everyday work activity takes many forms, from active engagement and championing of particular dominant visions of 'excellence', selective compliance, through to varying forms of resistance, both passive and active (eg Lucas 2014, Manathunga *et al* 2017).

Faced with such challenges, increasing attention is being given to where academics find the support, value, motivation and – yes – 'happiness' in their working lives. Induction and support in navigating pathways into and through academic careers and the formation of academic identities is variable. Collegiality, for example, proves to be a double-edged sword, with relations with peers varying from strong support and encouragement through to continual comparison, competition and the inducing of anxiety (MacFarlane 2016). Staff – as the studies selected for inclusion in this panel show – feel increasingly atomised in their decision-making and search for value and meaning in their work.

The recognition of the impact of universities' strive for 'excellence' on staff mental health and well-being concerns is acknowledged, but largely de-politicised in institutional contexts, with attention given to personal resilience, finding work-life balance, and individuals developing soft-skills to manage everyday interactions. The idea of 'the happy academic' is becoming increasingly considered in exploration of university work (Clark & Sousa 2018, Martin 2011, Watson 2009. See also The Happiness Research Institute 2017, 2015). If we remain alert to the risks of depoliticising and / or overly personalising what are fundamentally broader political challenges of 'good work',

attention to 'happiness' may offer a fresh lens through which to explore competing ideas of purpose, value and meaning in academic work and the everyday interactions within the university.

A Mosaic of Perspectives on Excellence, Value and Meaning in Academic Life

The papers selected for this session all explore, from different perspectives, the interface between public discourses of excellence with the everyday practice of university work. Drawing on a range of qualitative methodological approaches to capture narrative accounts of life within the academy, the collection offers a rich and multi-faceted body of evidence highlighting how academic staff interpret their roles and navigate between institutional / sectoral demands and the need to find everyday value and meaning in the work they undertake.

Yet, as these papers highlight, the search for 'happiness' and 'good work' is fraught with tensions and the micro-politics of (re)making academic identities and work. The research presented here offers insight into the range ways individual academics actively comply with, submit to, or resist dominant discourses of excellence, what it means to 'be an academic', and the activities and expectations of work 'performance' that flow from these. Crucially, these papers also seek to 'close the loop', directly connecting discussions of academic identities and interactions to the wider policy and political challenges of academic work. In doing so, the papers offer a springboard into a critical discussion of resilience, resistance and the re-making of excellence in the measured university.

Specific Inputs

- Martha Caddell & Kim Wilder: **Resisting and Re-making 'Excellence': Everyday Transcripts of Value and Meaning in Academic Work**

This contribution explores how academics navigate and re-frame ideas of 'excellence' as they transition through their careers. In examining where they find happiness in their everyday work we see the intertwining of discourses of excellence and collegiality, with the latter seen both as a source of positive support and a 'darker' relationship associated with competition and compulsion.

- Sam Ellis: **"The satisfaction of a job well done": value and meaning in the role of programme leader**

This panel contribution examines the lived experiences of programme leaders through the lenses of academic motivation and 'prestige rewards'. What motivates staff to take on and excel in these roles? Where do they find meaning and value in their work?

- Pauline Miller Judd: **Developing academic identity - the impact of 'happiness' in University culture**

This study explores the experience of staff transitioning into academic careers from the creative industries drawing on narratives of personal and professional identity and life/ career transitions.

- Alison Gilmour: **#Wearetheuniversity: Strike Action and the Re-making of Academic Identities**

This contribution will consider the use of social media during the 2018 University and College Union industrial, where engaging in digital activism resulted in the use of social media as a vehicle to build networks not previously envisioned, reclaim a sense of collective endeavour, and regain a positive sense of professional identity.

- Ann Tierney: **More than 'Just a Teaching Fellow': Creating Value and Meaning in Teaching-focused Academic Roles**

In an increasingly research-dominated culture, being "teaching-only" can appear to be a consolation prize, being judged against the criteria for research-active staff. This contribution explore the reasons why academics are drawn to this role and how they define and create value in it.

Format of Session

We present key findings from these studies in a dynamic format that encourages attendees to engage in discussion of the cross-cutting themes. Through the session, participants will have the

opportunity to build (through the use of a range of Lego, art materials, etc) a physical artefact or rich picture of 'the happy academic'. In doing so, the practical, policy and political barriers to this will be explored. This activity will be shaped by research vignettes and other inputs drawn from the session papers. Each contribution will challenge and prompt further development of the group's artefacts / pictures and deepen our discussion of the navigation, resistance, and remaking of 'excellence' in the measured university.

Key prompt questions which guide the discussion and activity are:

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 - What are the practical, political and policy implications of adopting a 'happiness' lens to explore academic work?
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