

101 'I work 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, and I often think those kind of academics are invisible': Communicating ideal academic identity and complicity with cultures of overwork in English higher education

Jessica Wren Butler

Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

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Abstract

Academics' working conditions are a hot topic in UK higher education, where ongoing industrial action foregrounds not just pay and pensions but broader sectoral norms, notably cultures of overwork (Bergfeld, 2018; Universities and Colleges Union, 2023). This presentation answers Sang et al's (2015) call to further scrutinise the persistence of academic overwork – drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with academic staff I argue that excessive working is not just a norm of practice but a method of externally communicating ideal academic identity by making it visible. Furthermore, overwork is not straightforwardly extractive or exploitative in a context where achievements are highly individualised. I conclude that academics are complicit in perpetuating cultures of overwork, and also that despite fantasies of a 'golden age' (Tight, 2010) and a tendency to blame 'neoliberalism' for a perceived contemporary decline in academic experience there is little to indicate that such cultures are recent inventions.

Full paper

Academics' working conditions are a hot topic in the higher education (HE) world, particularly in the UK where ongoing industrial action beginning in 2018 continues to focus not just on pay and pensions but broader sectoral norms, notably cultures of overwork (Bergfeld, 2018; Universities and Colleges Union [UCU], 2023). Amongst theorists and researchers of HE there is a tendency to attribute the degradation of academic life to so-called 'neoliberalism' and place the majority of the blame for this perceived backsliding at the feet of government policymakers and senior institutional managers (see, for example, Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Harrison, 2017; Tight, 2010, 2018, for comprehensive overviews of recent change to the UK HE landscape). However, as Sang et al (2015) observe, when it comes to practices of excessive working in particular, top-down instruction does not fully account for why this behaviour is perceived to be endemic to academic culture even against a backdrop of high awareness and vocal discontent. It is suggested that UK academic staff work, on average, the equivalent of two days in addition to a standard week of 35-40 hours (UCU, 2022), and strike action proves this is understood to be a problem, yet at the same time the discourse within institutions often frames overwork as an inevitable aspect of academic labour. So, what other reasons might there be to explain the ubiquity of these practices and their resilience in the face of critique? How might those working in academic spaces prove solidarity through collective support for bounded working and move away from explicitly or implicitly demanding expressions of solidarity through alignment to the ideal 'overworked scholar' identity?

This paper answers Sang et al's (2015) call to further scrutinise the persistence of overwork in UK academia. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with 29 academic staff ('traditional' academics and those in teaching- or research-focused positions) across a range of disciplines, roles, career stages, identities, and English higher education institutions in 2018 I argue that excessive working is not just a norm of practice in HE but a method of externally validating academic identity by making it visible. Furthermore, overwork is not straightforwardly extractive or exploitative in a context where achievements are highly individualised – although institutions may benefit from their staff's additional labour, staff themselves also add the achievements gained as a product of such work to their name, reputation, and CV. While the backdrop of individualistic competitiveness is not without a wider context that policymakers and institutional managers do their part to sustain, I suggest that academic employees are highly complicit in perpetuating this culture, and also that despite fantasies of a 'golden age' of academia (Tight, 2010) there is little to indicate that such individualism is a recent invention in the HE environment.

The data underpinning this paper was generated during a project designed to investigate top-level norms of academic culture in England and consider the implications for equality, diversity, and inclusion. Interview questions focused primarily on matters of identity, conceptions of success and failure, and the pleasures and pitfalls of academic life. Participants were not asked explicitly about overwork, although an average number of working hours per week was sought from most as a consequence of responses to the main cluster of questions. The topic of *time* arose frequently, in large part due to its connection with academic identity and the strongly-held belief that academia is characterised by its status as 'not a 9-5 job' (P1; P4; Sang et al, 2015).

The purpose of highlighting the ways overwork might be intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically imposed is not to assign blame or invoke shame but to refocus. A considerable amount of scholarly attention is directed at, inter alia, global trends in political economy, national-level HE policy, and diffuse notions of 'the institution' or 'university managers': putting to one side whether analyses and critiques of these macro forces are accurate or valid – how useful are they? At best, perhaps, we are shouting into the wind, railing against influences too large and established to overcome; at worst, in pushing criticism outwards we can sidestep the fact that we are part of the systems we observe, elide our compromised position, deny the rewards we reap by participating, and, more practically, forget our power, our agency, our freedom of choice. This paper is an invitation for self-reflection.

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