

Academic identities: impact of the research-teaching pendulum swings in higher education

Fengling Tang, Evelyn Wandia Corrado

University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

As BAME academics working in the UK higher education (HE) institutions, we set our research paper in the context of HE architect framed by the neoliberal mechanism with economification and marketisation of the university becoming a dominant practice as argued by many (Ball, 2021; Costa, 2022; Giroux, 2020). Using an autoethnographic approach alongside a critical review of existing literature and research, this research paper analyses the tensions between research and teaching in HE neoliberal architecture and addresses the impact on academic identities by interrogating the purpose of HE pedagogy and research (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Griffioen, 2024; Kwhali, 2017; Quigley, 2011). It is strongly hoped that this creates dialogical space for scholars, researchers and policy makers to further consider implications for HE pedagogy, research and policy making for fulfilment of HE institutions' societal responsibilities to support the individual learners, families and communities in the ever changing and challenging 21st century.

Full paper

As BAME academics working in the UK HE institutions, we set this research paper in the context of the 21st century higher education (HE) architect framed by the neoliberal mechanism with economification and marketisation of the university becoming a dominant practice in academia as recognised by many scholars and researchers (Arnove, 2003; Ball, 2021; Costa, 2022; Giroux, 2020; Hodgson and Watts, 2022). The paper aims to address the impact of the research-teaching requirement in HE institutions on academic identities drawing on an autoethnographic account alongside a critical review of existing literature and research (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Kwhali, 2017; Quigley, 2011; Trahar, 2009). The following research questions are to guide our paper:

- What does it mean to be an academic in HE institutions in the 21st century?

- In what way academic identities have been shaped and reshaped by the neoliberal request focusing on the research-teaching nexus?
- How will the space for academics to maintain and sustain passion and hope for HE pedagogy and research be nurtured?

This paper employs autoethnography alongside a critical review of existing literature and research in the field to discuss impact of neoliberal operations with the focus on research-teaching on academic identities and implications for HE pedagogy, research and policy making in the 21st century. Autoethnography is considered as an important part of narrative inquiry approach to research, drawing on individual experience to understand and give meaning to our lives through stories and narratives (Trahar, 2009). The autoethnographic approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others, and addresses research as a socially and politically constructed act as argued by Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011). Autoethnography is a powerful tool as individual stories illuminate the collective effects of discursive processes, in which individuals' symbolic and narrative struggles alongside sense of fulfillment and inspirations come live as illustrated by Mirza (2017).

The questions about the purpose of higher education, purpose of teaching and purpose of research have never been easy questions. The pros and cons of the business- or market-oriented changes in HE institutions are still debatable as argued by Christensen & Eyring (2011). However, Griffioen (2024) observes that research-teaching as part of the research-education nexus is embedded in many universities including research intensive universities and applied universities in international context to fulfill the university's societal responsibilities. Our research paper discusses the ways how the institutional focus on research-teaching has swung back and forth with implications for academics working in HE as observed by Deem and Brehony (2005), Denman (2005), Griffioen (2024), Kwhali (2017) and Quigley (2011) among other researchers. Each of the swing movement in institutional level has imposed extra weight on academics as many have experienced in the last two decades.

We share our concerns about the impact of the 'commodification of knowledge' driven by the neoliberal mechanism (Denman, 2005) on academics in HE institutions. We question the affordance, consistency and stability of the research-teaching focus as experienced by many academics drawing on autoethnographic accounts as well as existing research (Deem and Brehony, 2005; Lamont and Nordberg, 2014; Quigley, 2011). In the meantime, the neoliberal pressures have intensified in relation to the research-teaching requirements that fall onto academics (Gabriel, 2010; Wilson, 2017), especially post the Covid-19 pandemic with the 'accelerated' changes as a result of the economic recession. We reflect on how this has shaped and reshaped academic identities, which reflects experiences and perspectives of scholars and researchers in HE institutions (Baruch and Hall, 2004; Kwhali, 2017; Tang, 2023).

Drawing from Foucault's theory (1980), powerful structures in education impact academic pedagogical choices and teaching practices which in some cases appear to undermine their autonomy in their professional actions. Indeed, social, economic and political factors have increasingly continued to streamline what academics can research and teach unless their practices support the neoliberal agendas. There is increased authoritarian management approach in HE, which requires academics to be docile, follow the rules and not question the

systems and structures that continue to deprive the essence of freedom in knowledge production. We argue, that despite the toxic situation, academics can still exercise power and courage to uphold their autonomy and preserve democracy as they continue to influence knowledge. As argued by Hauggard (2022), individuals although influenced by structural systems, they can still have agency to influence their actions.

It is strongly hoped that this research paper creates dialogical space for scholars, researchers and policy makers to further consider implications for HE pedagogy, research and policy making for fulfillment of HE institutions' societal responsibilities in the 21st century.

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