EDITORIAL: The university as heterotopia? Space, time and precarity in the academy

Introduction to the Special Issue

Space, time and precarity in higher education: Exploring configurations of power and inequality in precarious times

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This Special Issue focuses on the theme of social precarity in higher education, as seen through a spatial and/or temporal lens. Social precarity as a concept is being increasingly used to explore issues relating to equity in higher education, primarily in relation to the increasing proportion of academic staff on casualised, short-term or part-time contracts in most countries where the sector is under neoliberal influence (see, for example: Ylijoki 2010; Chattarji 2016; Read & Leathwood 2020). In this introduction to the Special Issue I will be briefly discussing some of the key reasons for focusing firstly on social precarity, and secondly on the spatial-temporal. I also make use of Foucault's (1984) concept of 'heterotopia' when discussing some of the key ways that the papers in the Special Issue conceptualise precarity from a spatial-temporal lens. For Foucault, heterotopias are distinct spaces (bound also in time) that have a complex relationship to the wider social world, seeming to stand in contrast to wider social 'reality' but in many ways also encapsulating and enhancing aspects of this reality. As we will see, the papers in this Special Issue all point out the complexities of academia as a spatial-temporal phenomenon that in some ways promotes itself as a special 'space', but can also represent and even reinforce dynamics of inequality prevalent in the wider social world. Of particular focus is conditions of social precarity as experienced by both staff and students in the university.

Social precarity in the academy

Precarity as it is used in the social sciences is usually a term used in connection with insecure work, taken to encompass all forms of employment outside full-time employment on open-ended contracts, for example temporary contract work, part-time work and so-called 'zero hours' employment arrangements. A number of writers have, however, widened the definition of precarity to explore issues beyond insecure employment (Ettlinger 2007, 2021), and it is this broader conception that I was keen to encourage in this Special Issue. For example, some writers taking a poststructuralist perspective on precarity have drawn on the work of scholars such as Judith Butler. Butler uses the term 'social precarity' to refer to precariousness that is not simply the product of accident but is connected to, or indeed induced by, wider sociopolitical policies and practices (Butler 2004, 2009). Of particular concern to Butler is that such precarity is unequally experienced – the ability to cushion oneself from the worst effects of precarity is greatly mediated and constrained by the advantages and disadvantages of particular social positionings. Those in less advantaged positions are far more likely to experience insecurity and precarity in the first place, and to experience it more severely (Butler 2009).

Spatiality and temporality in relation to precarity

In exploring experiences of social precarity, it is imperative to note the fluidity of such experiences, as well as their contextual specificity. In order to do this, a temporal/spatial lens can be helpful. A temporal perspective can help to de-naturalise and problematise particular structures, cultures and practices that can seem natural and 'timeless' (see, for example: Clegg 2010; Yjiloki 2015; Lingard & Thompson 2017; Read & Leathwood 2018; Leathwood & Read 2020). Felt (2016) argues that we need a 'chronopolitical' analysis, a politics of time, to understand the changing temporal regimes of higher education – how the ways in which we are influenced to perceive time in academia need to be understood in relation to social dynamics of power. A spatial perspective can also help us in critical analysis of social dynamics, for example in emphasising how particular issues, policies, practices and interactions will vary according to their social and cultural locations (Alzeer 2018). Robertson (2009) notes that using spatiality as a theoretical tool needs also to include a critical perspective on power, in order to highlight the ways in which space can be constructed, shaped and experienced differently according to different facets of identity such as gender, social class and 'race', with implications that can work to exclude and marginalise (see, for example: Quinn 2003; Moss 2006; Burke et al. 2017; Bennett & Burke 2018; Manathunga 2019). Indeed, theorists of temporality such as Adam (1995, 2004), and of spatiality such as Harvey (1990) and Massey (1994, 2005), are keen to emphasise the need to look at both in conjunction.

The papers in this volume all draw out, in varying ways, the ways in which experiences of space, and especially time, underpin the experience of precarity amongst both students and staff in higher education. In discussing some of these analyses, I'd like to employ Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1984) as an anchorpoint.

Considering the university as a Foucauldian heterotopia

As Dalgleish (2021) notes, the university rarely seems to be used as an example of a heterotopia as conceived of by Foucault, but arguably fits this concept quite well. Foucault uses the term 'heterotopia' to describe spaces that seem to stand apart from the rest of social space, and seemingly hold contrasting qualities to the world of the everyday. This description could apply to utopias – to imagined spaces that lie in direct counterpoint or inversion to the 'real world'.

But for Foucault, the difference between utopias and heterotopias is their existence in reality – heterotopias are 'real' spaces or sites where 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted' (1984, p. 3). Foucault gives the example of the heterotopic space of the cemetery. Cemeteries tend to lie in spaces that are geographically marked as separate from, but linked in some way to, collective spaces such as towns, villages or municipalities. They stand in inverted contrast to the space of the town and the village, most notably in terms of the purpose of housing the dead as opposed to the living (for Foucault most spaces in the modern West are imagined according to binaries – public versus private; family space versus social space; leisure versus work; 'cultural' space versus 'useful' space).

A key insight and use of the notion of heterotopia is that heterotopic spaces, whilst seemingly inverting or contesting aspects of the 'everyday' social world, also *at the same time* manifest or represent aspects of this real world. Foucault points out a variety of ways in which sprawling, walled cemeteries demonstrate a particular conception of the social world that is culturally specific to Europe in the nineteenth century. The notion of individual tombs or burial plots (as opposed to collective medieval charnel houses) links to the increasing individualisation of 'Enlightenment' western thought. Moreover, the location of the cemetery in out-of-town spots links to the nineteenth century conception of death as an 'illness' – the dead body as a repository of disease that could infect the living. We can add to Foucault's description the reflection or representation in heterotopic spaces of real-world hierarchies of power and exclusion. For example, whilst death might be the 'great equaliser', inequalities of wealth were often mirrored in the degree to which individuals were able to be represented in death, through simple small tombstone slabs through to elaborate, ornate mausolea. This implicit representation works then to actually shore up or support power relations in the wider social world by containing and perpetuating them even in such seemingly different spaces, so that these particular power relations seem natural or inevitable. In multiple ways, the university can be seen as a heterotopic space where aspects of the wider social world are seemingly contested or even inverted, but at the same time this space works to implicitly represent and legitimise established dynamics of power such as those relating to gender, social class and 'race'.

Another relevant 'principle' of heterotopias that Foucault outlines is their specificity in time as well as space:

> Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. (Foucault 1984, p. 6)

The gendered language Foucault uses actually works well when considering the traditional space of the university, for of course they were originally established with men as the only possible inhabitors, at least in relation to the roles of student or professor (Leathwood & Read 2009). For students this inhabitation was and still is very obviously timebound by the length of the degree for which they are enrolled (usually three to four years for an undergraduate in the United Kingdom (UK) nations, for example).

For staff in the university their legitimate inhabitation is also ostensibly time-limited. Their contracts usually have a definitive start date. For permanent staff the end date is ostensibly open-ended, within certain parameters – for example the growing practice of explicitly denoting

a retirement age for academics, although traditionally this role could last until death. However, as we have seen, the growing proliferation of temporary contracted academics means that their legitimate 'occupancy' of their roles can, like students, have a very distinct end date, with ongoing, often nebulous and subtle, implications for their own sense of legitimacy in the institution (Read & Leathwood 2020).

The university as a permanent, 'timeless' space

As I have discussed elsewhere with Carole Leathwood (Read & Leathwood 2020), universities often utilise signifiers of age and 'permanence' as ways to indicate their legitimacy in the production, teaching and dissemination of knowledge. For example many universities in the UK that were built in the Victorian era – alongside other public institutions like museums and libraries – utilised neogothic or neoclassical architectural styles, signifying age and longevity, and in the case of neoclassical architecture, an evocation of a representation of ancient Graeco-Roman culture that was particularly valorised in Western elite education (Leathwood and Read 2009). Many universities today utilise such architecture and other historical signifiers in their marketing materials, and are keen to emphasise particular institutional traditions as well as those common across higher education such as the graduation ceremony, where graduands and academics alike wear gowns symbolising a link to the medieval origins of (Western) higher education. Platt and Huffman Walker (2019) discuss how graduation dress acts as a specific link between the individual wearer and this history, citing Rudolph (1990): 'the exhibition of professors displayed in academic robes … tied the new academics into an ancient tradition of learning' (cited in Platt & Walker 2019, p. 126).

Foucault notes that some heterotopic spaces are 'heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time' (1984, p. 7), giving as examples the museum and the library. He argues that their seeming goals of accumulating an 'archive' that might gather together as much knowledge as possible (and from as many time periods and cultures as possible) is a distinctly modern Western phenomenon, and sees in this goal 'the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages' (1984, p. 7). There are some parallels here with the goal of many higher education institutions to have a broad, wide-ranging curriculum and, in many cases, to cover the key texts or authors that are seen as foundational in a discipline. Of course, however, these curriculum choices have long been challenged for their partiality – as have museum representations and library collections – in relation to their valorisation of certain dominant forms of knowledge over others, reflecting wider patterns of social inequality, including of course the contemporary growing movement calling for the decolonisation of the higher education curriculum (see, for example: Pimblott 2019). Nevertheless this conception of impartially producing, collating and disseminating knowledge feeds into a specific discourse of universities as objective arbiters of truth that I have elsewhere labelled as the 'ivory tower rationalist' discourse (Read 2018, p. 599), and which is a key foundation of the sector's sense of its ultimate value, its contribution to the 'public good'.

In these ways then, universities make use of temporal symbolism to promote a notion of themselves as distinct spaces of value, emphasising tradition, age and a conception in some ways of being 'out of time' in relation to the everyday outside world. Morris and Rowell (2023) allude to such a conception in their discussion of a dominant public discourse of university life as 'a "dream space" … a place of armchair pondering and luxury pursuits' (p. 29). Of course, this is a trope that seldom matches the reality. For example, in a discussion of the 'projectification' of academic research into bite-size 'fast and flexible' pieces of work, Ylijoki

states, 'the image of a lonely scholar pursuing his (seldom her) intellectual interests alongside teaching duties in a long-term, often lifetime, dedication to one's disciplinary field has become a part of academic folklore' (Ylijoki 2015, p. 94). Nevertheless, despite contemporary 'fast' academia, there can also be a seemingly higher status connected to those academics who can achieve 'permanent' long-term positions within higher education. Such a feeling can be ambiguous and not explicitly expressed, but can be shown for example in the anxieties of academics on casualised contracts who are concerned that students, and other staff, may not see them as fully legitimate – or a 'real' academic – because of their contract status (Read & Leathwood 2020). For example, Olivia, a lecturer in a study I conducted with Carole Leathwood, stated:

> I feel very conflicted about letting students know about my contractual status [...]. A lot of this, if I'm honest, is about passing as a real academic and is therefore a question of pride. I might be concerned that students might not take me so seriously if they know I'm a temporary, disposable and replaceable member of staff – they could start to question my legitimacy or abilities (Olivia, part-time teaching fellow, aged 41–50, white British, middle-class). (Read & Leathwood 2020, p. 545)

The university as a place of accelerated time

Despite a conception of the university as existing in a timeless 'bubble', there is nevertheless a multiplicity of temporal dynamics infusing academic cultures and practices, and a number of writers have emphasised how the contemporary influence of neoliberalism in the sector, in particular the increased pressure to 'efficiently' meet targets in relation to publications and research income, has led to an alternative valorisation of speed, of 'accelerated time' (see, for example: Sugarman & Thrift 2017, cited in Olds et al., 2023). Guzmán-Valanzuela and Di Napoli (2015) discuss how such 'fast time' pressures in academia co-exist in tension with other forms of time that feel more 'sluggish', connected with bureaucratic procedures, a form of temporality that Rowell and Morris (2023) describe as 'glacial time', using the examples of waiting for the result of a grant application, or the renewal of a job contract.

The academics in Olds and colleagues' study felt a range of pressures associated with the perceived acceleration of time, such as the constant pressure to publish, that impacted negatively on their wellbeing. As they state, 'the mechanisms of neoliberalism in universities create temporal, corrosive norms that impact academics materially, psychologically and physically' (Olds et al., 2023, p. 14). Rowell and Morris (2023) discuss how the fast pace and time pressures of a university culture that demands the continual meeting of multiple targets and the passing of quality indicators can lead to exhaustion and burnout amongst staff – and is likely to be felt most acutely by those already disadvantaged. For example, they discuss how one of the particular disadvantages of being on a short-term contract is a need to neglect the present in favour of constant planning for the future:

> I have got this three-year contract, and I'm very grateful for it, but at the same time, as soon as you start those three years, time is ticking, and it's like, you've got to do everything that this job requires of you. Plus, everything else in order to build your CV and yourself up to be able to be, you know, competitive for the next time (Carli). (Rowell & Morris, 2023, p. 36).

One of the principles of heterotopias that Foucault outlines is in relation to the gatekeeping of the heterotopic space:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. (Foucault 1984, p. 7)

University campuses often restrict entry on a day-to-day basis by the use of security guards or electronic systems that check the legitimacy of entrants, often via possessing the requisite (time-limited) card or badge. In order to acquire these markers of legitimacy, students need to apply for and succeed in obtaining a place at university in what can be a very competitive and anxiety-inducing process. And for academic staff, achieving a position, whether temporary or permanent, is usually also extremely competitive and stressful, as the quotation earlier from Carli attests, and often also involves the revocation of legitimacy markers such as staff cards and email addresses[1]. Such difficulties are highlighted in the paper by Hoskins and colleagues (2023), in looking at the ways in which mentorship and especially sponsorship by doctoral supervisors can be crucial for those PhD students aiming for a career in academia. Hoskins and colleagues' research highlights how the influence of neoliberalism in academic cultures and practices influences the selection by supervisors of potential doctoral candidates – and with doctorates often being essential for an academic position this is a key gatekeeping activity. Supervisors are under pressure both by their own workloads, which limit the amount of support they are able to provide, and by institutional imperatives on 'timely completion', driven by sectoral accountability measures, to ensure their students complete their studies within a certain number of years. Therefore academics find themselves considering whether a potential doctoral candidate will be able to work quickly enough to 'get through' within the required time limit (Hoskins et al., 2023). Discourses of the value of speed and 'efficiency' thus not only constrain the experience of established academics but also play into who can even be considered for an academic role. Moreover, as we will go on to discuss, these discourses are highly gendered, raced and classed, working to promote those who are already socially advantaged and further constrain those who are already in some ways positioned as 'other' in academia.

The unequal experience of precarity: Equity and dis/advantage in academic life

As I mentioned earlier, a key goal of this Special Issue is to explore how utilising various theoretical tools – a broad conceptualisation of social precarity, and a spatial and/or temporal lens – can help us understand the ever-changing configurations of precarity in higher education, and to highlight the implications for equity and social justice. This is particularly important in (post-)pandemic times, where existing patterns of inequality in higher education have seemingly been exacerbated. For example, in the UK context, women and black minority ethnic staff were already disproportionately on temporary and insecure contracts in the sector before the pandemic (see, for example: UCU 2016). When the pandemic's effects began to be exhibited, lockdowns often led to research projects being curtailed and teaching ended early or moved online. In the UK, whilst some institutions furloughed or extended the contracts of casualised staff, a more common move was to make such staff redundant or not renew contracts, a pattern repeated in higher education in other countries across the global North such as the

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[1] Many thanks to Dr Matthew Bunn for providing a helpful comment on this point during the drafting of this paper.

United States (US) and Australia, and particularly impacting women and junior academics (Baker 2020; McKie 2020). As a report from the Rapid Research Information Forum for the Australian government notes, it has been those already experiencing precarity in higher education that find themselves most at risk in relation to post-pandemic employment cuts in the sector (RRIF 2020).

Broad definitions of precarity such as Butler's can be utilised to explore a wide variety of power dynamics, configurations and flows of dis/advantage in the academy. The three papers in this Special Issue all draw on this definition, in combination with other complementary theorists. For example, Olds and colleagues include Hattam and Weiler (2022)'s conceptualisation of casualised academics as 'illegitimate' in the academy, due to their feelings and experience of marginality. The article utilises an autoethnographical approach to explore the complexities of experience of such academics who are also more likely to be those teaching 'non-traditional' students and/or students on foundational or extra-curricular programmes at the 'periphery' of the academy. Situated in an Australian context, the article focuses on the varying ways in which the onset and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already existing precarious experiences of such academics.

Based in the UK, Rowell and Morris also use autoethnography, in conjunction with the richly generative co-walking exercise of 'bimbling', which they define as walking without specific intent through an environment which can then provide jumping-off points from which to recall events, experiences and feelings. Although they primarily focus on precarity in relation to job security, they too situate their paper within a broad Butlerian perspective of precarity as politically induced and inequitably experienced, in their focus on the intersections of gender and class in relation to the experience of precarity in academia by early career academics.

Finally, Hoskins, Moreau and Hugh utilise a similar approach, citing Waite (2009), who highlights the importance of looking at the wider political and institutional contexts in which precarity is experienced. Also drawing on UK-based research, the authors explore the uncertainties of achieving an academic position in their study of the role of doctoral supervisors, focusing in particular on institutional practices of mentorship and sponsorship. Their study highlights the ways in which these dynamics can be affected by gendered, raced and classed positionings, and the ways in which differential experience of these processes can accentuate and perpetuate social patterns of advantage and disadvantage in relation to achieving a stable position in academia.

All three papers in this Special Issue explore how aspects of social precarity in higher education have been unequally experienced, and are likely to more deeply affect, people who have already experienced social disadvantage in relation to identity or social positionings. Rowell and Morris explore the complex ways in which gender and class, as well as health challenges, have infused their experiences as casualised academics on teaching-only contracts, trying to gain a stable foothold in academia. Also discussing precarity in relation to academic staff, Olds and colleagues outline the ways in which the effects of social precarity can be experienced most strongly by those academics who are already work in positions 'on the margins' of the academy. They use as a focus their own experience as academics working on alternative pathway programs designed to offer alternative routes to higher education entry. Academics working on these programs are often employed on a casualised basis, and their work is more endangered in times of cutbacks than other departments. They work with predominantly 'non-traditional' students (that is, those who do not easily fit the traditional conception of the higher education student as white, middle- or upper-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-male and of school-

leaving age), and stress the commitment of staff on these programs to 'philosophies of care, social justice and student flourishing' (p. 13), aiming to challenge and resist the neoliberal imperatives infusing higher education more broadly. However, this requires heavy emotional as well as academic labour, which was only heightened with the threat of the effects of the pandemic. Finally, Hoskins and colleagues also explore the ways in which the effects of precarity can be unequally experienced, in their study of the role of supervisors as 'gatekeepers', 'able to give and withdraw opportunities to their doctoral students with significant consequences for career prospects' (p. 48). As discussed earlier, when academics decide which students to supervise, they can be influenced by the neoliberal imperative of 'timely' completion rates, choosing students who are more likely to be able to complete 'on time'. As Hoskins and colleagues note, this imperative

> … is underpinned by a model of the doctoral student and scholar in general as carefree, free to develop a research and teaching portfolio during and after their PhD. This view of the scholar as autonomous denies the existence of multiple relations of care-giving and care-received they are embroiled in, both outside and in academia (p. 50).

They explore the complexities of gendered, classed and racialised dynamics of 'affinities' between supervisor and student which can have implications for the degree of mentorship or 'sponsorship' that develops, and conclude with a call for supervisors and their institutions 'to be vigilant as per how power operates through discourses and practices which favour some scholars and exclude others' (p. 59). All three papers aid in such reflections by shining a spotlight on the workings of power within specific aspects of academic culture and practice, in particular conditions of social precarity. I earlier discussed the ways in which higher education can be seen as a Foucauldian 'heterotopia'. For Foucault, one of the key aspects of a heterotopic space is not only its positioning as in many ways outside or apart from the 'real' or everyday world, but also that the heterotopic space nevertheless mirrors (and perhaps accentuates) aspects of this wider everyday world. As the papers in this Special Issue attest, wider patterns of social advantage and disadvantage prevalent in the 'real world' also play out within the walls of the university, and in complex ways the university may act both as a progressive space, but also a space where inequality can be further exacerbated.

Conclusion

My aim in this introductory paper has been to highlight some of the key ways in which the Special Issue papers insightfully utilise the conception of social precarity, as well as spatial and particularly temporal analyses, to explore ways in which the experience of precarity in academic life and work has particular consequences in terms of equity and dis/advantage. I also employed Foucault's concept of heterotopia as an anchorpoint in this discussion of spatial-temporal dynamics in the precarious space of higher education, looking in particular at the ways in the university legitimises itself as a special, authoritative arena of knowledge, through recourse to discourses of 'tradition', age and 'permanence'. These discourses however can arguably accentuate the marginality, and potentially question the legitimacy, of those who are positioned as temporary workers within the university gates. Moreover, as these papers outline in greater detail, the temporal dynamics of higher education also include forms of 'accelerated' time due to the influence of neoliberal values of 'timeliness' and 'efficiency' alongside a relentless pressure of workload that has negative effects for all, but particularly for those who already find themselves in positions of marginality or insecurity in the academy.

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